Satellite Test of the Isotrophy of the One-Way

Speed of Light Using ExTRAS

Peter Wolf

Bureau International des Poids et Mesures,
Pavillon de Breteuil, 92312 Sèvres CEDEX, France
and
Queen Mary and Westfield College, School of Mathematical Sciences,
Mile End Road, London El 4NS, Great Britain

Abstract: *A test of the second postulate of special relativity, the universality of the speed of light, using the ExTRAS (Experiment on Timing Ranging and Atmospheric Sounding) payload to be flown on board a Russian Meteor-3M satellite (launch date January 1997) is proposed. The propagation time of a light signal transmitted from one point to another without reflection would be measured directly by comparing the phases of two hydrogen maser clocks, one on board and one on the ground, using laser or microwave time transfer systems. An estimated uncertainty budget of the proposed measurements is given, resulting in an expected sensitivity of the experiment of $\delta c/c < 8\times10^{-10}$ which would be an improvement by a factor of $\sim$ 430 over previous direct measurements and by a factor of $\sim$ 4 over the best indirect measurement. The proposed test would require no equipment additional to what is already planned and so is of inherently low-cost. It could be carried out by anyone having access to a laser or microwave ground station and a hydrogen maser.*

1. Introduction

Einstein's second postulate, affirming the universality of the speed of light for inertial frames, is fundamental to the theories of special and general relativity. It can be tested directly by comparing the propagation times of two light signals travelling from one point to another along the same path but in opposing directions (often referred to as a test of the isotropy of the one-way speed of light). The only such test, was carried out by Krisher

et al. [1], who compared the phases of two hydrogen masers separated by a distance of 21 km and linked via an ultrastable fibre optics link of the NASA deep space network. The sensitivity of this experiment, expressed as a limit on the anisotropy of the speed of light, was $\delta c/c < 3.5 \times 10^{-7}$, where c is the velocity of light in vacuum. Riis et al. [2] tested the isotropy of the first order Doppler shift of light emitted by an atomic beam (and indirectly thereby the second postulate) using fast-beam laser spectroscopy obtaining the currently best limit on the anisotropy, $\delta c/c < 3 \times 10^{-9}$. This presents a 10 fold improvement on previous values from experiments measuring the isotropy of the first order Doppler shift using the frequency links in the NASA GP-A rocket experiment [3] and so-called Mössbauer rotors [4, 5]. In the test theory of Mansouri and Sexl [6] the above results can be interpreted as limits on the parameter α using the relation $\delta c/c = (1+2\alpha)v/c$ [1, 2] where v is the velocity of the Earth with respect to the mean rest frame of the universe ($v \sim 300$ km/s). This yields values of $\alpha = -1/2 \pm 1.8 \times 10^{-4}$ and $-1/2 \pm 1.4 \times 10^{-6}$ for the experiments by Krisher et al. [1] and Riis et al. [2] respectively.

The experiment proposed here would test the isotropy of the transmission time of light signals between two points directly and on a non-laboratory scale with an estimated accuracy of $\delta c/c < 8 \times 10^{-10}$, using the ExTRAS payload on board the Russian Meteor-3M satellite scheduled for launch in January 1997, T2L2 (Time Transfer by Laser Light) time transfer and a hydrogen maser at the ground station. This, if realized, would present a 430 fold improvement on previous direct measurements [1] and a slight improvement on the value obtained by Riis et al. [2]. In Section 2 the principle of the experiment is explained while Section 3 provides an evaluation of its sensitivity aimed at including all error sources that may exceed one picosecond and based on the uncertainty budget for the T2L2 method by Thomas & Uhrich [7].

2. Experimental principle

The ExTRAS payload consists of two active, auto-tuned hydrogen masers communicating with ground stations via a PRARE (Precise Range and Range-Rate Equipment) microwave link and a T2L2 laser link. Once operational, the system should reflect laser pulses, emit and receive microwave signals and date all such events on the on-board time scale provided by the hydrogen masers. The satellite will follow polar orbit, at an altitude of 1000 km with a period of order 100 min and a duration of one passage of $\sim$ 17 min.

In principle, the proposed experiment is similar to that performed by Krisher et al. [1]. A laser signal emitted from the station E is reflected at the satellite S and returned to E (see figure 1). The readings of the ground hydrogen maser at emission (τ_0) and reception (τ_2) and that of the space maser at the moment of reflection (τ_1) are recorded. The differences $\tau_1 - \tau_0$ and $\tau_2 - \tau_1$ represent the up and down transmission times T_1 and T_2 respectively plus some initial phase difference of the clocks. Note that no synchronization convention or

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$C^0 - l_c$

procedure is assumed. Einstein's second postulate would require that for a series of measurements, after accounting for the path asymmetries, the difference $T_1 - T_2$ should be equal to a constant Δ_0 (due to the initial clock offset) independent of the spatial orientation of the individual links. More particularly one obtains for a single link (see [8] for more detail),

$$T_1 - T_2 = \Delta_0 + 2\,\vec{R}(t_e).\vec{v}(t_e)/c^2 + (\Delta_{i(up)} - \Delta_{i(down)}) + O(c^{-3}) \qquad (1)$$

where $\vec{R}(t_e)$ is the vector from E to S at the coordinate time of emission of the signal t_e in a geocentric, inertial reference frame, $\vec{v}(t_e)$ is the velocity of the ground station at signal emission in the same frame and Δ_i are internal delays (cables etc.).

The initial clock offset Δ_0 is a constant, provided that the two clocks are syntonized. This can be achieved at the 10^{-15} accuracy level (the best hydrogen maser stability) using time transfer data over a sufficiently long integration period and taking into account all known effects (gravitational redshift, second order Doppler, maser drift). One would expect the effect on the syntonization, of an eventual anisotropy of the propagation time of the light signals, to average out in a global treatment using time transfers in all spatial directions.

Terms of order c^{-2} amount to ~ 40 ns and can be calculated to picosecond accuracy if $\vec{R}(t_e)$ and $\vec{v}(t_e)$ are known to within ~ 50 m and ~ 0.01 m/s respectively, which represents no difficulty for modern satellite orbitography. Of course, a possible anisotropy would also have an effect on the satellite orbit determination, but as the range R cancels to first order in (1) this effect would be negligible. Furthermore, the satellite orbit is obtained from round-trip ranging measurements, which should, again to first order, be insensitive to anisotropy of the propagation time of the light signals.

Terms of order c^{-3} can amount to several picoseconds but can be calculated to picosecond accuracy without difficulty [8]. The effect of asymmetry in the atmospheric delays for the up and down links is below one picosecond.

Hence, after accounting for path asymmetry, any variation of the difference $T_1 - T_2$ with the spatial orientation of the laser link should be due to a violation of the second postulate.

3. Estimation of the experiment sensitivity

The sensitivity of the proposed test can be estimated by considering two individual laser links as shown in figure 2. The time intervals $\tau_2 - \tau_0$, $\tau_5 - \tau_3$ and $\tau_3 - \tau_0$ are measured using the ground hydrogen maser with the interval $\tau_4 - \tau_1$ obtained from the space hydrogen maser. Designating the individual transmission times by T_1, T_2, T_3 and T_4 as shown in figure 2 and

assuming that one of the links is colinear with the direction of the presumed anisotropy, the difference between the two links is given by,

$$(T_1 - T_2) - (T_3 - T_4) + \Delta_s = 2 \Delta_a (1-\cos\theta). \tag{2}$$

Here Δ_s represents the correction due to the path asymmetries of the individual links; Δ_a is the maximum delay for a single transmission due to the anisotropy, and θ is the angle between the two links in the inertial geocentric frame.

If Einstein's second postulate is true the right hand side of equation (2) should be equal to zero within the measurement error.

The experiment should be capable of detecting an anisotropy under the condition

$$\epsilon < 2 \Delta_a (1-\cos\theta), \tag{3}$$

where ϵ represents the total measurement uncertainty.

The sensitivity of the experiment is therefore given by,

$$\delta c/c = \Delta_a/T = \epsilon/[2T(1-\cos\theta)] \tag{4}$$

where T is a typical transmission time ($T_{max} \sim 12$ ms).

Maximal sensitivity is achieved when the measurements are taken at the beginning and the end of a single passage of the satellite directly above the station. In this case $\theta \sim 180°$, $T \sim 12$ ms and the error accumulated due to the instability of the hydrogen masers is very small because of the short integration time of ~ 17 min. Table 1 lists the individual sources of uncertainty that are estimated to exceed 1 ps. Four sources of uncertainty are listed in the table:

(i) The stability of the hydrogen masers for integration times of 1000 s is of the order 2.1 parts in 10^{15} [7] which gives an accumulated uncertainty of ~ 2 ps per maser over an integration time of 17 min.

(ii) As systematic errors in the on-board payload cancel when the two links are differenced, only its instability over 17 min contributes. Ten picoseconds [7] seems a conservative estimate for such a short integration time.

(iii) Only the instability of the Earth station during the experiment contributes. Degnan [9] states that the precision of satellite laser ranging stations is of order 1 to 3 mm, which corresponds to an uncertainty of less than ten picoseconds.

(iv) Information on the counter uncertainties is provided by the T2L2 proposing team.

In the calculation of $(T_1 - T_2) - (T_3 - T_4)$ the differences τ_4-τ_1 and τ_3-τ_0 measured by the space and ground clock respectively appear with a factor of 2. Hence all uncertainty sources participating in the measurement of these intervals ((i),(ii),(iv)) have been multiplied by this factor.

For the measurement of anisotropy in a direction which is not in the plane of orbit, the two links are separated by the time necessary for the Earth station to change its position with the rotation of the Earth so as to see the satellite from opposing directions ($\sim$ 14500 s). The hydrogen maser stability for such integration times is of the order 1,5 parts in 10^{15} [7], which gives an uncertainty of $\sim$ 44 $\sqrt{2}$ ps in (i). Contributions from other error sources are those given in Table 1. Hence the value for the total measurement uncertainty is $\epsilon \sim$ 72 ps. Note also that in this case θ cannot exceed 120°.

Substituting these values for ϵ and θ into (4) gives an experimental sensitivity of $\delta c/c$ = $7,9 \times 10^{-10}$ when the direction of the anisotropy lies in the orbital plane of the satellite and $\delta c/c$ = 2×10^{-9} otherwise. Following Krisher et al. [1] the experiment can be interpreted in the framework of the test theory by Mansouri & Sexl [6] resulting in limits on the parameter α of $\alpha = -1/2 \pm 4 \times 10^{-7}$ and $\alpha = -1/2 \pm 1 \times 10^{-6}$ for the two cases, assuming v = 300 km/s.

Conclusion

The proposed test of the special theory of relativity is expected to improve the upper limit on anisotropy of the propagation time of light signals obtained from the best previous direct measurement [1] by a factor of $\sim$ 430. It should also provide an improvement (by a factor of $\sim$ 4) on the value inferred from the measurement of the first order Doppler shift by Riis et al. [2]. The extension of this type of experiment to space-time domains (separation of the clocks of $\sim$ 3700 km) which are not attainable in a laboratory may also be an advantage. And last but not least, the experiment does not call for the insallation of additional equipment, hence it can be considered an essentially no-cost experiment which is generally a decisive factor for research in fundamental science.

The same experiment could be performed using the PRARE microwave transfer system in the two-way ranging mode [7] rather than the T2L2 links. This might be of advantage as the PRARE method is not weather dependent. However, uncertainties in the ionospheric propagation delays due to different up and down link frequencies introduce an additional uncertainty of $\sim$ 20 ps per link, which slightly decreases the overall sensitivity of the

experiment to $\delta c/c = 9{,}8 \times 10^{-10}$ for the case where the direction of the anisotropy lies in the orbital plane of the satellite and to $\delta c/c = 2{,}1 \times 10^{-9}$ otherwise.

It is likely that the sensitivity of the experiment can be improved if data taken continuously during the passage of the satellite is used to search for the sinusoidal variation with θ of the signal due to anisotropy. Furthermore, if a likely orientation of the presumed anisotropy is identified, for example the direction of the observed dipole anisotropy of the cosmic microwave background [10], it should be possible to improve the experimental sensitivity by statistical treatment of data from different stations and from repeated measurements.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the same type of experiment would yield increased accuracy if performed on satellites at higher altitudes, as this would decrease the τ/T ratio in (4). One possible candidate is the Radioastron 1 mission (apogee 85000 km, perigee 2000 km) scheduled for launch in late 1996.

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Source of uncertainty	σ/ps
Hydrogen masers(i)	$4 \sqrt{2}$
On-board payload(ii)	20
Earth station(iii)	$10 \sqrt{2}$
Counters(iv)	$20 \sqrt{2}$
Total(quadratic sum)	$\varepsilon = 38$

Table 1: Anticipated uncertainty budget for measurement of an anisotropy whose direction lies in the orbital plane. All uncertainties are in picoseconds and correspond to an estimated one standard uncertainty, σ.
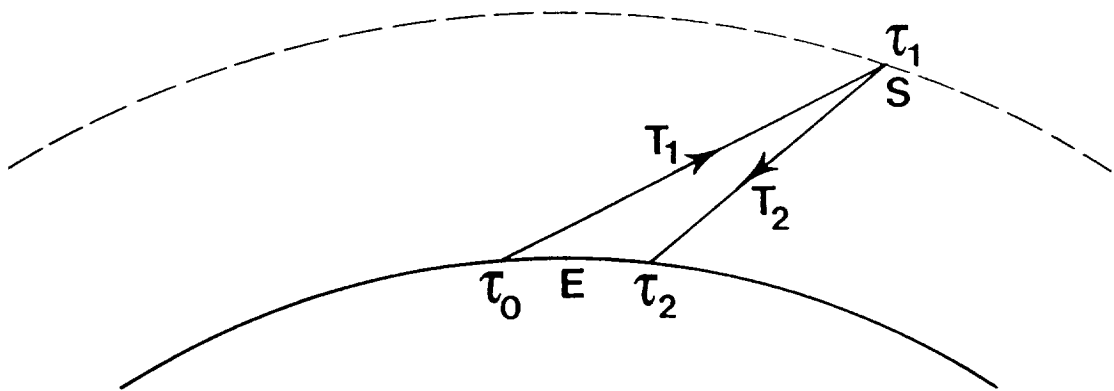
Figure 1: *Two-way laser link between an Earth station and the satellite viewed in a geocentric, inertial frame.*
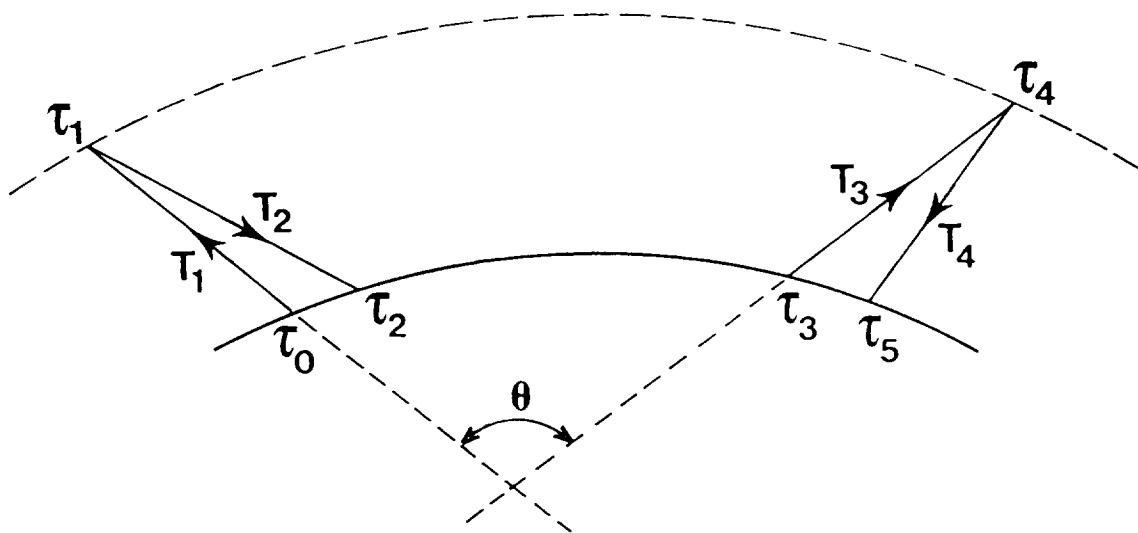

Figure 2: *A pair of two-way laser links between an Earth station and the satellite, as viewed in a geocentric, inertial frame.*

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

LUTE MALEKI (JPL): The experiment that we did at JPL, as you know, was limited because of differential drift of the two H-masers which are not deterministic.

PETER WOLF (BIPM): Yeah, that was the first line of the error budget, which was — that is what I meant by "hydrogen maser," their instability over the integration time, just to accumulate an error in time.

LUTE MALEKI (JPL): No, I'm not talking about the individual instability, I'm talking about the drift that is indeterministic; one maser moves on way, and the other maser moves the other way.

PETER WOLF (BIPM): I didn't consider that. I will have to look into that. Thank you anyway.

PTTI '94
OFFICIAL ATTENDEES' LIST

Khalid S. Al-Dawood
Saudi Arabian Standards Organization
P.O. Box 3437
11471 Riyadh
SAUDI ARABIA

Khalid K. Al-Dossary
Saudi Arabian Standards Organization
P.O. Box 3437
11471 Riyadh
SAUDI ARABIA

David W. Allan
Allan's Time
P.O. Box 66
Fountain Green, UT 84632 USA

John C. Arnold
AlliedSignal Technical Services Corporation
One Bendix Road
Columbia, MD 21245 USA
410/964-7931

Franklin G. Ascarrunz
University of Colorado
248 Pheasant Run
Louisville, CO 80027 USA

Thomas R. Bartholomew
TASC
1190 Winterson Road
Linthicum, MD 21090 USA
410/850-0070

Perry C. Bates
Techtrol Cyclonetics, Incorporated
815 Market Street
New Cumberland, PA 17070 USA

Francoise S. Baumont
Observatoire de la Cote d'Azur
CERGA
Avenue Nicolas Copernic
06130 Grasse FRANCE
33 93 405338

Henry V. Bazak, Jr.
Hughes Space and Communication
P.O. Box 92919
Los Angeles, CA 90274 USA
310/416-4179

Ronald L. Beard
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8150
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/767-2595

G. Thomas Becker
Air System Technologies, Incorporated
14232 Marsh Lane, Suite 339
Dallas, TX 75234 USA
214/402-9660

Jacques Beser
3S Navigation
23141 Plaza Pte Drive
Laguna Hills, CA 92653 USA

Robert E. Blair
U.S. Air Force
Newark Air Force Base
Newark, OH 43057 USA
614-522-7377

Scott S. Blake
NASA/GSFC
Code 5313
Greenbelt, MD 20710 USA
301/286-3224

Richard E. Blumberg
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1538

Jimmie Brad
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8150
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/767-5039

Keith L. Brandt
Spectrum Geophysical Instruments
1900 West Garvey Avenue South
Suite 200
West Covina, CA 91790 USA
714/544-3000

Lee A. Breakiron
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1888

Gerhard Brenninger
ESG Elektroniksystem-und
Logistik GmbH
Einsteinstrasse 174
D-81675 Munchen
GERMANY
49 89 9216 2681

Ellis H. Bryant, Jr.
Weatherchron Company
5400 New Peachtree Road
Atlanta, Georgia 30341 USA

James A. Buisson
Antoine Enterprises
7714 Martel Place
Springfield, VA 22152 USA

Edward E. Burkhardt
Buckhardt Monitoring Service
P.O. Box 1411
Glen Allen, VA 23060 USA
804/261-1800

James A. Burton
CNO N63
12739 Purdham Drive
Woodbridge, VA 22192 USA
703/695-8202

Bob Bush
Leitch, Incorporated
920 Corporate Lane
Chesapeake, VA 23320 USA

Edgar W. Butterline
AT&T
900 Routes 202 and 206
Bedminster, NJ 07921 USA
908/234-4545

Malcolm Calhoun
Jet Propulsion Laboratory
4800 Oak Grove Drive
Pasadena, CA 91109 USA
818/354-9763

James C. Camparo
The Aerospace Corporation
P.O. Box 92957
Los Angeles, CA 90009 USA
310/336-6944

Thomas P. Celano
TASC
12100 Sunset Hills Road
Reston, VA 22090 USA
703/834-5000

Harold Chadsey
U. S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1888

Laura G. Charron
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1529

Raymond E. Claflin, III
Claflin Associates
122 Morningside Drive
Leominster, MA 01453 USA
508/534-4777

Randolph T. Clarke
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1034

Dwin Craig
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8150
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/404-7060

Leonard S. Cutler
Hewlett-Packard Company
3500 Deer Creek Road
Palo Alto, CA 94303 USA
415/857-5259

Williiam B. Dabney
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1549

Gerrit de Jong
NMi Van Swinden Laboratorium
P. O. Box 654
2600AR Delft
THE NETHERLANDS
31 15 691 623

Steve D. Deines
Rockwell International
350 Collins Road, Northeast
MS 152-264
Cedar Rapids, IA 52498 USA
319/395-5038

Edoardo V. Detoma
FIAT CIEI - SEPA
Corso Giulio Cesare 300
10154 Torino
ITALY
39 11 268 2523

James A. DeYoung
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1034

Andrew R. Dickens
9812 Summerday Drive
Burke, VA 22015 USA
203/323-6299

William A. Diener
Jet Propulsion Laboratory
4800 Oak Grove Drive
Pasadcna, CA 91109 USA
818/354-6670

Rob Douglas
National Research Council of Canada
M-36
K1A OR6 Ottawa
CANADA
613-993-5186

James M. Eler
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-0350

Donald A. Emmons
Frequency and Time Systems
34 Tozer Road
Beverly, MA 01519 USA
508/927-8220

John W. Evans
DISA
10701 Parkridge Boulevard
Reston, VA 22091 USA
703/487-3173

Sheila Faulkner
U. S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1460

Raymond L. Filler
U.S. Army Research
AMSRL EP ME
Fort Monmouth, NJ 07703-5601 USA
908/544-2467

Richard H. Flamm
Lockheed Missiles and Space Company
1992 Adams Avenue
Melbourne, FL 32935 USA
407/867-3145

Henry F. Fliegel
Aerospace Corporation
2350 El Segundo Boulevard
El Segundo, CA USA
310/336-1710

Earl Fossler
TRAK Microwave Corporation
Systems Division
4726 Eisenhower Boulevard
Tampa, FL 33634 USA
813/884-1411

Hugo Fruehauf
Ball Corporation
3 Parker
Irvine, CA 92718 USA
714/770-5000

Michael J. Full
NAPA-GPS
955 L'Enfant Plaza North, Southwest
Washington, DC 20024 USA
202/651-8014

Ivan J. Galysh
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8150
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/404-7060

Joseph M. Gardner
Leitch, Incorporated
920 Corporate Lane
Chesapeake, VA 23302 USA

Michael Garvey
Frequency and Time Systems
34 Tozer Road
Beverly, MA 01915 USA
508/927-8220

Richard Gast
TRAK Microwave Corporation
Systems Division
4726 Eisenhower Boulevard
Tampa, FL 33634 USA
813/884-1411

Glen G. Gibbons
GPS World
859 Willamette Street
Eugene, OR 97401 USA
503/984-5235

Al Gifford
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
1101 Maryland Avenue, Northeast
Washington, DC 20002 USA
202/404-5039

Asbjorn M. Gjelsvik
MITRE
Burlington Road
Bedford, MA 01730 USA
617/271-3712

Raymond L. Granata
NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center
Greenbelt, Maryland 20771 USA
301/286-3702

Joe C. M. Green
AlliedSignal Technical Services Corporation
129 North Hill Avenue
Pasadena, CA USA
818/584-4472

Charles A. Greenhall
Jet Propulsion Laboratory
4800 Oak Grove Drive
MS 298-100
Pasadena, CA 91109 USA
818/393-6944

Michael Grimm
Jet Propulsion Laboratory
4800 Oak Grove Drive
Pasadena, CA 91109 USA
818/354-2245

Fran Groat
Hewlett-Packard Company
5301 Stevens Creek Boulevard
Santa Clara, CA 95052-8059 USA
408/553-2307

Donald M. Haddox
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA

Darrell R. Hale
AlliedSignal Technical Services Corporation
One Bendix Road
MS C-1300
Columbia, MD 21045 USA
410/964-7097

Robert Hamell
Jet Propulsion Laboratory
4800 Oak Grove Drive
Pasadena, CA 91109 USA
818/354-4944

Wayne Hanson
National Institute of Standards and Technology
325 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80303 USA
303/497-5233

Michael D. Harkins
Applied Technology Associates, Incorporated
6800 Backlick Road
Suite 303
Springfield, VA 22150 USA
703/644-0301

Bill Harron
Datum, Incorporated
4545 Pilgrim Lane
Boothwyn, PA 19061 USA
610/485-9506

Gregory E. Hatten
U.S. Air Force
2nd Space Operations Squadron
300 O'Malley Avenue
Suite 41
Falcon Air Force Base, CO 80912-3041 USA
719/550-6377

Helmut Hellwig
Air Force Office of Scientific Research
110 Duncan Avenue, Suite B115
Bolling Air Force Base
Washington, DC 20332-0001 USA
202/767-5017

Thomas P. Holden
Stanford Telecommunications, Incorporated
1221 Crossman Avenue
Sunnyvale, CA 94089-1117 USA
408/745-0818

Terry A. Howell
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1449

Steven T. Hutsell
U.S. Air Force
2nd Space Operations Squadron
300 O'Malley Avenue
Falcon Air Force Base, CO 80912-3041 USA
719/550-6394

Jeffrey S. Ingold
AlliedSignal Technical Services Corporation
One Bendix Road
Columbia, MD 21045 USA
410/964-7188

Andrew Johnson
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1561

Jeffrey A. Johnson
Overlook Systems Technologies, Incorporated
1950 Old Gallows Road
Suite 400
Vienna, VA 22182 USA
703/893-1411

Edward C. Jones
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8150
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/767-0590

Sarunas K. Karuza
The Aerospace Corporation
P.O. Box 92957
Los Angeles, CA 90009-2957 USA
213/336-6837

Shalom Kattan
Guide Technology, Incorporated
920 Saratoga Avenue, Suite 205
San Jose, CA 95129 USA
408/246-9903

Robert H. Kern
Kernco, Incorporated
28 Harbor Street
Danvers, MA 01923 USA
508/777-1956

Wendy L. King
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-0486

William J. Klepczynski
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1521

Douglas E. Koch
Naval Space Command
808 Pleasant Hill Lane
Bowie, MD 20716 USA
301/249-7494

Paul A. Koppang
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-0350

Guenter Kramer
Physikalish-Technische Bundesanstalt
P.O. Box 3345
D-38023 Braunschweig, GERMANY
49 431 592 4420

Paul F. Kuhnle
Jet Propulsion Laboratory
4800 Oak Grove Drive
Pasadena, CA 91109 USA
818/354-2715

Eugen F. Kunzi
SIEMENS AG.
Department SI E SY 4
Landshuter Strabe 26
D-85716 Unterschleissheim
GERMANY
49 89 3179 2297

Jack Kusters
Hewlett-Packard Company
5301 Stevens Creek Boulevard
Santa Clara, CA 95052-8059 USA
408/553-2041

Graybill P. Landis
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8150
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/404-7061

Marie M. Largay
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8153
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/767-9133

Julius Law
Jet Propulsion Laboratory
4800 Oak Grove Drive
Pasadena, CA 91109 USA
818/354-2988

Ming C. Lee
Western Range U.S. Air Force
826 13th Street
Vandenberg Air Force Base, CA 93437 USA

Albert Leong
The Aerospace Corporation
P.O. Box 92957
MS M1/135
Los Angeles, CA 90009 USA
310-336-6444

Sigfrido M. Leschiutta
Politecnico di Torino
24 Corso Abruzzi
10125 Torino
ITALY
38 11 381 8715

Judah Levine
National Institute of Standards and Technology
Code 847
325 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80303 USA
303/497-3903

Wlodzimierz W. Lewandowski
Bureau International des Poids et Mesures
Pavillon de Breteuil
92310 Sevres
FRANCE
33 1 45 077063

Chuck Little
Hewlett Packard Company
5301 Stevens Creek Boulevard
Santa Clara, CA 95052-8059 USA
408/553-2506

Michael A. Lombardi
National Institute of Standards and Technology
325 Broadway
Division 847
Boulder, CO 80303 USA
303/497-3212

Gene E. Long
Odetics
P.O. Box 2727
LaPlata, MD 20646 USA
301/870-3311

Pete R. Lopez
TRAK Microwave Corporation
Systems Division
4726 Eisenhower Boulevard
Tampa, FL 33634 USA
813/884-1411

John McK. Luck
Orroral Observatory, Auslis
P.O. Box 2
2611 Belconnen ACT
AUSTRALIA
61 6 288-3263

Carl F. Lukac
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1527

Edward M. Lukacs
U.S. Naval Observatory
11820 Southwest 166th Street
Miami, FL 33177-2175 USA
305/235-0515

Collin C. MacMillan
Sigma Tau Corporation
1711 Holt Road
Tuscaloosa, AL 35404 USA
205/553-0038

Phu V. Mai
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-0350

Lute Maleki
Jet Propulsion Laboratory
4800 Oak Grove Drive
Pasadena, CA 91109 USA
818/354-3688

David G. Markham
U.S. Navy
COMSPAWARSYSCOM/PMW175
2451 Crystal Drive
Arlington, VA 22245 USA

Demetrios N. Matsakis
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-0585

Thomas B. McCaskill
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8153
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/404-7068

Angela Davis McKinley
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1528

Norma G. Meyer
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1525

Mihran Miranian
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1522

Donald H. Mitchell
TrueTime, Incorporated
2835 Duke Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95407 USA
707/528-1230

Raymond W. Moskaluk
Hewlett-Packard Company
5301 Stevens Creek Boulevard
Santa Clara, CA 95128 USA
408/553-3319

David G. Munton
University of Texas
Applied Research Laboratory
10000 Burnet Road
Austin, TX 78758 USA
512/835-3831

William J. Murphy
Computer Sciences Corporation
P.O. Box 446
Building 1440
Edwards Air Force Base, CA 93523 USA
805/277-2004

James A. Murray
SEA, Incorporated
6215 Houston Street
Alexandria, VA 22310 USA
202/404-7057

Craig W. Nelson
SpectraDynamics, Incorporated
445 South 43rd Street
Boulder, CO 80303 USA

Clyde C. Norris
Computer Sciences Corporation
P. O. Box 217
Clearfield, UT 84015 USA
801/777-4845

Jerry R. Norton
Johns Hopkins University
Applied Physics Laboratory
Johns Hopkins Road
Laurel, MD 21104 USA

Timothy W. Oakley
Sigma Tau Corporation
1711 Holt Road
Tuscaloosa, AL 35404 USA
205/553-0038

Jay Oaks
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8150
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/767-1434

David B. Opie
Physical Sciences, Incorporated
635 Slaters Lane
Suite G101
Alexandria, VA 22314 USA
703/548-6410

Jorge Osorio
Observatorio Naval Buenos Aires
2099 Av. Espana
1107 Buenos Aires
ARGENTINA
64 1 36 1162

Terry N. Osterdock
Stellar GPS Corporation
800 Charcot Avenue
Suite 110
San Jose, CA 95131 USA
408/383-1520

H. Bryan Owings
Sigma Tau Corporation
1711 Holt Road
Tuscaloosa, AL 35404 USA
205/553-0038

Thomas E. Parker
National Institute of Standards and Technology
325 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80303 USA
303/497-7881

Ralph E. Partridge
Los Alamos National Laboratory
DX-12, MS-P947
P.O. Box 1663
Los Alamos, NM 87545 USA
505/667-5255

William H. Paul
Tecom NRO-DT-T
White Sands Missile Range, NM 88002 USA
505/674-9220

Peter Z. Paulovich
NISE East Det Norfolk
P. O. Box 1376
Norfolk, VA 23501-1376 USA
804/396-0287

Bruce Penrod
TrueTime, Incorporated
2835 Duke Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95407 USA
707/528-1230

James C. Perry
NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center
Greenbelt, MD 20771 USA
301/286-3471

Harry E. Peters
Sigma Tau Standards Corporation
1711 Holt Road
Tuscaloosa, AL 35404 USA
205/553-0038

Larry E. Peters
Sigma Tau Standards Corporation
P.O. Box 1877
Tuscaloosa, AL 35403 USA
205/553-0038

James S. Phelps
Scientific and Technical Analysis
11300 Naples Mill Road
Fairfax, VA 22043 USA
703/934-0188

William D. Phillips
National Institute of Standards and Technology
PHY A167
Gaithersburg, MD 20899 USA
301/975-6554

Eva F. Pikal
National Institute of Standards and Technology
325 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80303 USA
303/497-5629

William M. Powell
U. S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1528

Edward D. Powers
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8150
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/767-5004

Robert E. Price
AlliedSignal Technical Services Corporation
One Bendix Road
Columbia, MD 21045 USA
410/964-7437

David W. Rea
Spectrum Geophysical Instruments
1900 West Garvey Avenue, South
Suite 200
West Covina, CA 91790 USA
714/544-3000

Elza K. Redman
DoD
9800 Savage Road
Fort Meade, MD 20577 USA
301/688-7526

Wilson G. Reid
Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8150
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/404-7068

Victor S. Reinhardt
Hughes Space and Communications
P.O. Box 92919
Los Angeles, CA 90009 USA

William J. Riley
EG&G Rubidium
35 Congress Street
Salem, MA 01970 USA
508/745-3200

Eric B. Rodal
Trimble Navigation
585 North Mary
Sunnyvale, CA 94088 USA
408/481-2039

Ronald C. Roloff
Datum, FTS
8005 McKenstry Drive
Laurel, MD 20723 USA
301/725-3636

Harry W. Sadler III
AlliedSignal Technical Services Corporation
One Bendix Road
Columbia, MD 21045 USA
410/964-7425

Roberto O. Sartori
Observatorio Naval Buenos Aires
2099 Av. Espana
1107 Buenos Aires
ARGENTINA
54 1 361 1162

Bernard R. Schlueter
Observatory of Neuchatel
CH2000 Neuchatel
SWITZERLAND
41 38 241861

Richard E. Schmidt
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-0487

Steve Schumacher
Loral Space and Range Systems
2900 Murrell Road
Rockledge, FL 32955 USA
407/635-7647

Mike Shunfenthal
TASC
12100 Sunset Hills Road
Reston, VA 22090 USA
703/834-5000

Ralph E. Simons
Frequency and Time Systems
34 Tozer Road
Beverly, MA 01915 USA
508/927-8220

Hank T. Skalski
DOT/OST
400 7th Street, Southwest
Washington, DC 20590 USA
202/366-4894

Luke R. Smith
Sigma Tau Standards Corporation
1711 Holt Road
Tuscaloosa, AL 35403 USA
205/553-0038

Benjamin F. Smith
Stanford Telecommunications, Incorporated
1221 Crossman Avenue
Sunnyvale, CA 94089-1117 USA
408/745-2640

Andrew G. Snow
Frequency and Time Systems
34 Tozer Road
Beverly, MA 01915 USA
508/927-8220

Armin Soering
Deutsche Telekom AG
3 AM Kavalleriesand
64295 Darmstadt
GERMANY
49 6151 83 4549

Samuel R. Stein
Timing Solutions Corporation
1025 Rosewood Avenue, #200
Boulder, CO 80304 USA
303/939-8481

Michael A. Street
Bonneville Power Administration
905 Northeast 11th Avenue
Portland, OR 92232 USA
503/230-4363

Richard L. Sydnor
Jet Propulsion Laboratory
4800 Oak Grove Drive
Pasadena, CA 91109 USA
818/354-2763

Philip E. Talley, Jr.
Retired
1022 Eagle Crest
Macon, GA 31211 USA
913/745-4661

Claudine Thomas
Bureau International des Poids et Mesures
Pavillon de Breteuil
92312 Sevres Cedex
FRANCE
33 1 45 07 7073

Larry M. Thomas
Computer Sciences Corporation
44609 North 86th Street East
Lancaster, CA 93535 USA
805/277-6130

Roger Thornburn
Stellar GPS Corporation
800 Charcot Avenue
Suite 110
San Jose, CA 95131 USA
408/383-1522

Terry L. Trisler
Ball Corporation
Efratom Division
3 Parker
Irvine, CA 92718 USA
714/770-5000

Gregory B. Turetzky
Trimble Navigation
645 North Mary Avenue
Sunnyvale, CA 94086 USA
408/252-9510

David A. Turner
National Research Council
2101 Constitution Avenue, Northwest
HA-286
Washington, DC USA
202/334-2895

Pierre J. M. Uhrich
LPTF Observatoire de Paris
61 Avenue de L'Observatoire
F-75014 Paris
FRANCE
33 1 40 512216

M. J. VanMelle
Rockwell
5505 Flintridge Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80918 USA
719/550-2705

Francine M. Vannicola
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1525

Vince Vannicola
U.S. Coast Guard
7323 Telegraph Road
Alexandria, VA 22015 USA
703/313-5811

Christian Veillet
Observatoire de La Côte d'Azur
Avenue Nicolas Copernic
06130 Grasse
FRANCE

John R. Vig
U.S. Army Research Laboratory
AMSRL-EP-ME
Fort Monmouth, NJ 07703-5601 USA

Frank J. Voit
The Aerospace Corporation
P.O. Box 92957
Los Angeles, CA 90009-2957 USA
310/336-6764

Warren F. Walls
Femtosecond Systems
P.O. Box 6005
Columbia, MD 21045-8005 USA
410/740-1427

Heidi E. Walls
Femtosecond Systems
P.O. Box 6005
Columbia, MD 21045-8005 USA
410/740-1427

Fred L. Walls
National Institute of Standards and Technology
325 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80303 USA
303/497-3207

Harry T. M. Wang
Hughes Research Lab
3011 Malibu Canyon Road
Malibu, CA 90265 USA
805/317-5431

Fred L. Walls
National Institute of Standards and Technology
325 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80303 USA
303/497-3207

Harry T. M. Wang
Hughes Research Lab
3011 Malibu Canyon Road
Malibu, CA 90265 USA
805/317-5431

S. Clark Wardrip
AlliedSignal Technical Services Corporation
726 Foxenwood Drive
Santa Maria, CA 93455-4221 USA
805/937-6448

Marc A. Weiss
National Institute of Standards and Technology
325 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80303 USA
303/497-3261

Paul J. Wheeler
U.S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-0516

Joseph D. White
U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
Code 8151
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000 USA
202/767-5111

Carol A. Williams
Department of Mathematics
University of South Florida
4202 East Fowler Avenue
PHY 114
Tampa, FL 33620 USA
813/974-3553

Warren L. Wilson
Lockheed Missiles and Space Company
701 East Thrift Avenue
Kingsland, GA 31548-8213 USA
912/673-1148

Gernot M. R. Winkler
U. S. Naval Observatory
3450 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20392-5420 USA
202/653-1520

Peter Wolf
Bureau International des Poids et Mesures
Pavillon de Breteuil
92312 Sevres Cedex
FRANCE
33 14 507 7075

William H. Wooden
Defense Mapping Agency
8613 Lee Highway
Stop A-13
Fairfax, VA 22031-2137 USA
703/285-9339

David F. Wright
Radiocode Clocks Ltd.
54 Watling Street South
5467BQ Church Stretton Shropshire
UNITED KINGDOM
44 1694 723691

James L. Wright
Computer Sciences Raytheon
P.O. Box 4127
Patrick Air Force Base, FL 32925 USA
407/494-2014

Andy Wu
The Aerospace Corporation
2350 East El Segundo
El Segundo, CA 90245-4691 USA
310/336-0437

Victor S. Zhang
National Institute of Standards and Technology
325 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80303 USA
303/497-3977

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Dr. Richard Sydnor, Technical Editor

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Goddard Space Flight Center
Greenbelt, Maryland 20771

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- Recent developments in rubidium, cesium, and hydrogen-based frequency standards, and in cryogenic and trapped-ion technology.
- International and transnational applications of Precise Time and Time Interval technology with emphasis on satellite laser tracking, GLONASS timing, intercomparison of national time scales and international telecommunications.
- Applications of Precise Time and Time Interval technology to the telecommunications, power distribution, platform positioning, and geophysical survey industries.
- Applications of PTTI technology to evolving military communications and navigation systems.
- Dissemination of precise time and frequency by means of GPS, GLONASS, MILSTAR, LORAN, and synchronous communications satellites.

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