CUBESAT APPLICATION FOR PLANETARY ENTRY (CAPE) MISSIONS: MICRO-RETURN CAPSULE (MIRCA)

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INTRODUCTION

The Cubesat Application for Planetary Entry Missions (CAPE) concept describes a high-performing Cubesat system

- includes a propulsion module and miniaturized technologies capable of surviving atmospheric entry heating, while reliably transmitting scientific and engineering data.

The Micro Return Capsule (MIRCA) is CAPE’s first Planetary Entry Probe (PEP) flight prototype

This presentation summarizes CAPE’s configuration and typical operational scenario.

It also summarizes the results of GSFC’s IRAD work on MIRCA’s design and basic aerodynamic performance.
CAPE CONFIGURATION

- **Service Module (SM):** contains the subsystems necessary to support vehicle targeting (propulsion, ACS, computer, power) and the communications relay unit.
- **Planetary Entry Probe (PEP):** carries the scientific instrumentation and Thermal Protection System (TPS) technology monitoring.

The total system mass is less than 5 kg. The solar array generates about 17W at 1 AU, and the system nominally consumes about 11W of power.
Operations Concept

- Three mission phases are identified: 1. Deployment, 2. Targeting, and 3. Planetary Entry.

1. Deployment
2. Targeting and orbit adjustment
3. Planetary Entry
   A. Entry probe deployment
   B. PEP survival
   C. Communications from PEP to SM
   D. SM demise after probe data re-transmission.
MIRCA

- Micro Return Capsule.
- First PEP re-entry demonstrator for CAPE.
- Currently being designed and implemented at NASA GSFC. Future partnerships possible.
- Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 primary objectives were to verify MIRCA’s avionics architecture and aerodynamic stability.
- Accomplishments this year include:
  - Completion of avionics architecture and select electrical interface testing
  - Software system loading
  - Design and manufacturing of the vehicle’s aeroshell structure prototype
  - Preliminary qualification of the vehicle’s aerodynamic performance (by analysis).

MIRCA PEP prototype current aeroshell design
CAPE-MIRCA

- Mission Objective: use the Low Earth Orbit (LEO) environment to demonstrate key operational aspects involved in de-orbit and atmospheric entry of a miniature planetary probe.
- Potential for university participation, bringing students and organizations with limited resources within the realm of planetary exploration.
- Expected to be ready for orbital demonstration in the 2016 time-frame.
MIRCA Design Concept

- The aeroshell design is driven by the Cubesat form-factor constraints.
- The subsystem arrangement is defined by the requirement to situate the CG as much forward of the CP as possible to satisfy static stability conditions.
- Sensors included are:
  - Radiometer
  - Thermocouples
  - Pressure Transducer
  - Three-axis accelerometer
  - Three-axis gyroscope
AVIONICS ARCHITECTURE

- Electrical Integration and Test (I&T) is nearly complete, with Processor and power boards, and battery pack fully tested. The Inertial Measurement Unit (IMU) has been tested individually, and is operational. Linux has been loaded and tested, and will be the basis for the flight software.
MIRCA AERODYNAMICS

- Flight stability is one of the most important aspects in MIRCA’s performance since it affects heating, communications, and in the end, mission success.

- To estimate stability, Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) analysis was carried out for three different cases (prototype vehicle):
  - Drop from balloon
  - Drop from suborbital sounding rocket
  - Drop from LEO orbit

- These are cases that will serve to qualify the vehicle for planetary entry beyond Earth.

- Aero-thermal differences are a given, and will be modeled based on results from MIRCA’s test plan.
AERODYNAMIC / CFD ANALYSIS – LEO RE-ENTRY

- Peak boundary conditions obtained from LEO entry at max. g-loading – Aerodynamic analysis using Navier-Stokes Equations at point of maximum deceleration:
  - Speed 4792 m/s (~ Mach 15)
  - Altitude 53374 m
  - Zero Initial Spin Rate
  - Medium: Air, zero angle of attack
  - Radiation Boundary Conditions

Re-Entry Trajectory
PRESSURE DISTRIBUTION AND AERODYNAMIC COEFFICIENTS

Aerodynamic coefficients show a stable flight for zero AOA. Flow-field turbulence not prevalent for stable flight (but turbulence is a given for non-zero AOA). Pressure drag force at stagnation point ~ 3 x Weight.
CFD CONCLUSIONS

- Vehicle static stability appears sound.
- Dynamic stability and turbulence effects may still be a concern, especially if the initial attitude has non-zero AOA.
- Restoring forces will take effect eventually, but high-altitude aerodynamic heating at off-nominal AOAs could be significant during re-entry.
- A small vehicle spin for initial gyroscopic stability should take care of the initial flight stage.
SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

- CAPE enables a broad new class of planetary entry and in situ missions, and brings planetary exploration capability to resource limited organizations, including universities and small businesses.
- GSFC is demonstrating the operational scenario involved in deploying a micro-probe in a planetary environment.
- MIRCA will serve to demonstrate the first Cubesat-sized entry vehicle.
- Continuing work in FY15, with an in-air flight demonstration of MIRCA’s operational prototype.
- Collaboration is possible in the future.