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(54) **METHODS AND SYSTEMS FOR
MONITORING COMPONENTS USING
RADIO FREQUENCY IDENTIFICATION**

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(76) Inventors: **Donald B. Lee**, Shoreline, WA (US);
Trevor M. Laib, Woodinville, WA (US)

Correspondence Address:

**JOHN S. BEULICK
ARMSTRONG TEASDALE LLP
ONE METROPOLITAN SQUARE
SUITE 2600
ST. LOUIS, MO 63102-2740 (US)**

(57) **ABSTRACT**

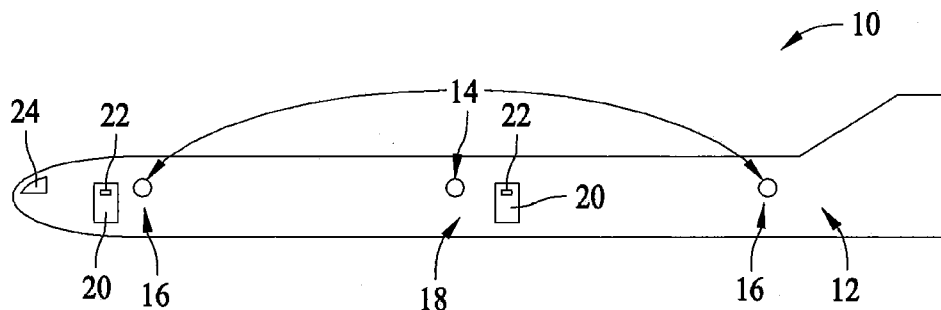
Methods and systems for a monitoring system for a vehicle are provided. The system includes at least one radio frequency identification (RFID) system comprising at least one transceiver and a plurality of RFID tags, the tags coupled to a plurality of vehicle components, a plurality of vehicle component retaining assemblies coupled to the plurality of components and operatively configured to substantially shield the amount of radio frequency (RF) energy received from the transceiver by each tag in a first position and unshield each tag in a second position, and an alert system for receiving information regarding the plurality of vehicle components and for generating an alert based on the information received.

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(22) Filed: **Sep. 18, 2006**

Related U.S. Application Data

(60) Provisional application No. 60/719,318, filed on Sep. 21, 2005.



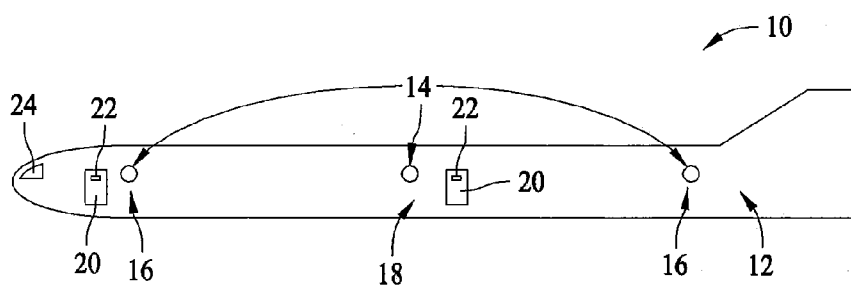


FIG. 1

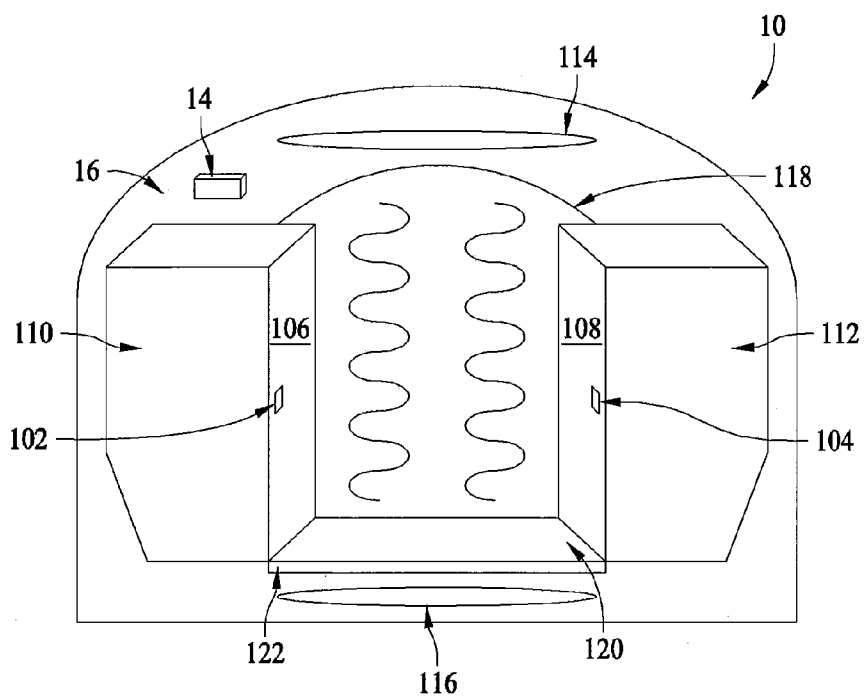


FIG. 2

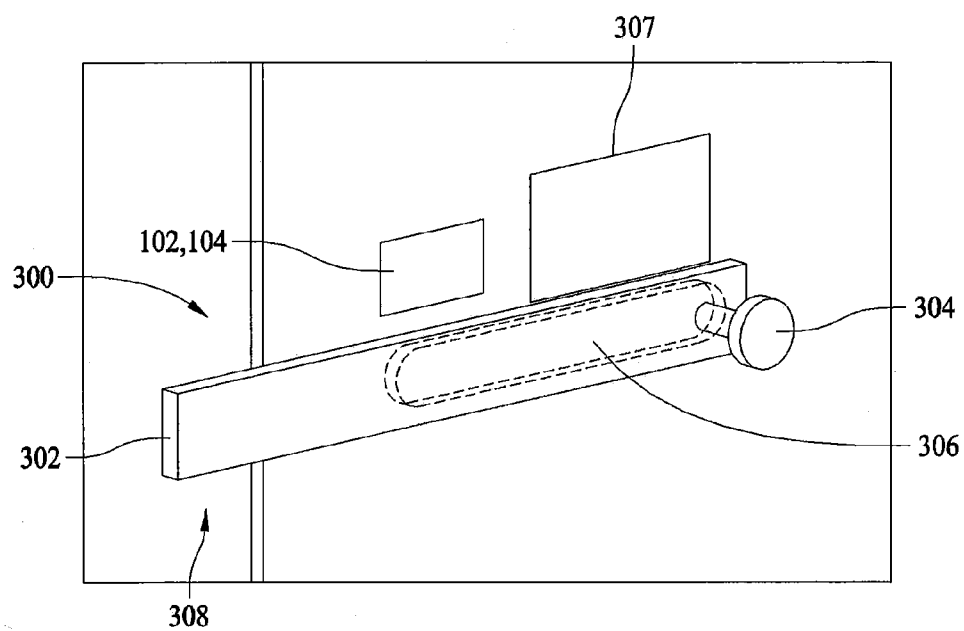


FIG. 3A

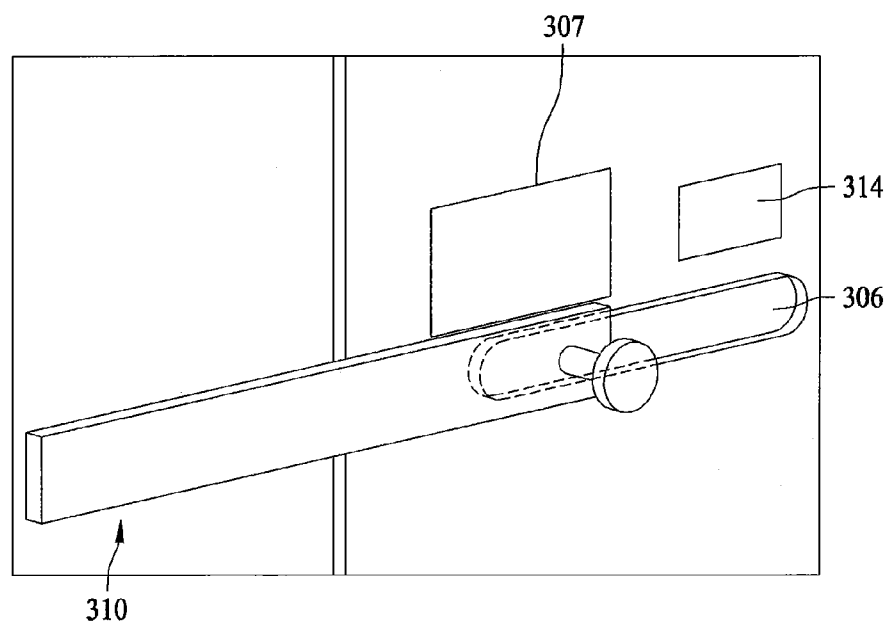


FIG. 3B

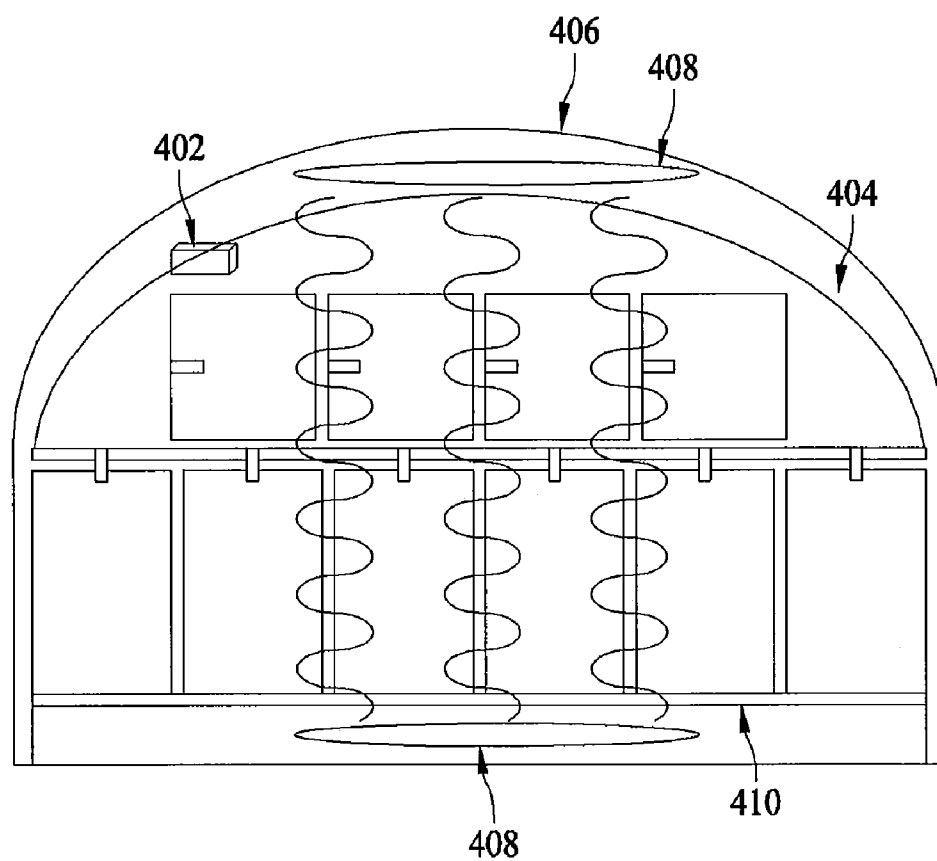


FIG. 4

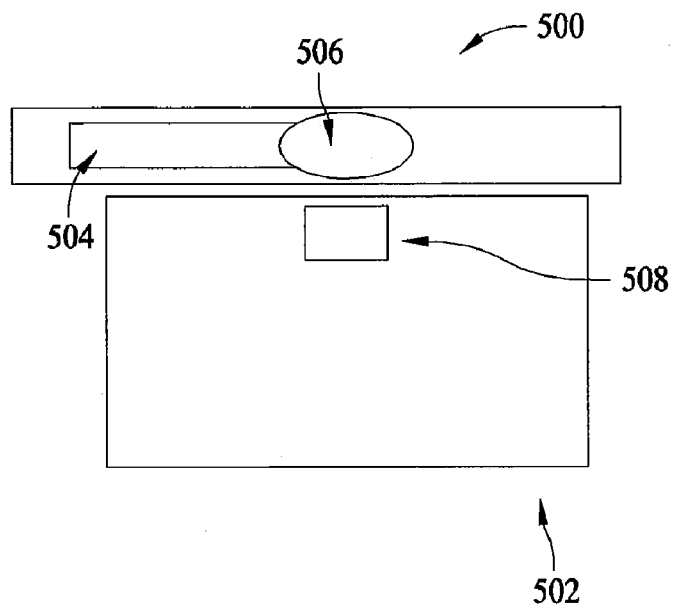


FIG. 5A

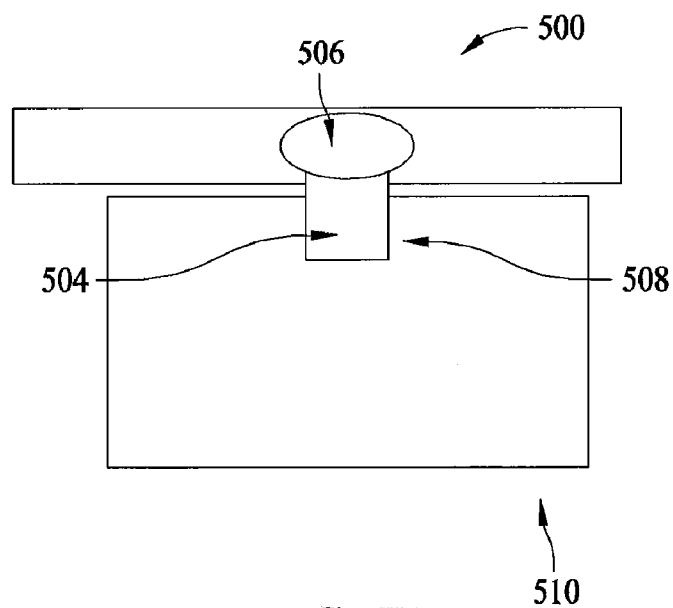


FIG. 5B

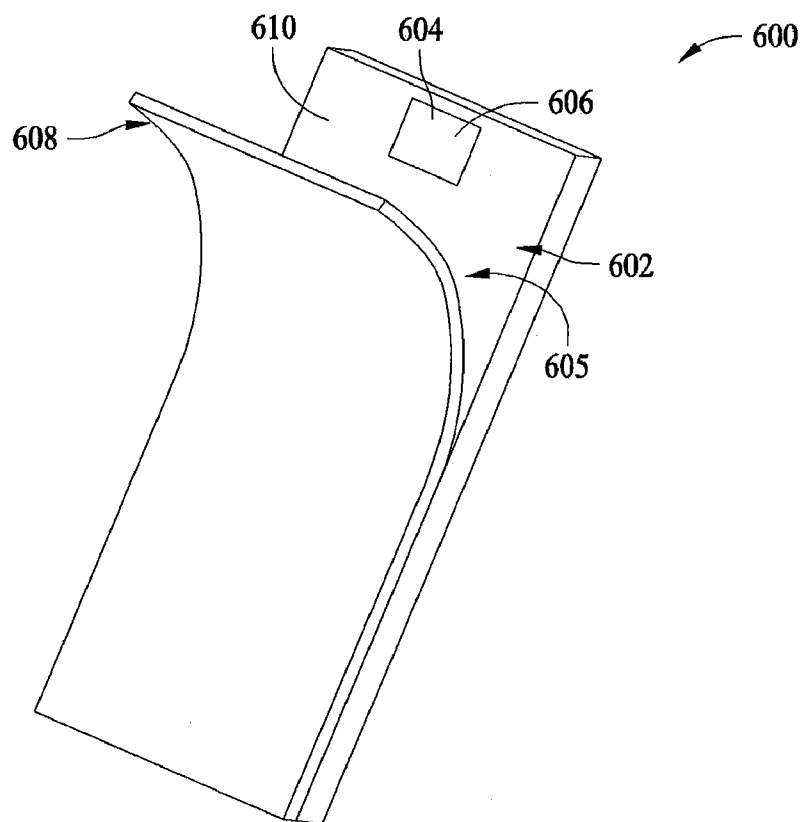


FIG. 6

METHODS AND SYSTEMS FOR MONITORING COMPONENTS USING RADIO FREQUENCY IDENTIFICATION

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the priority of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/719,318 entitled "System and Method for Conditional Door Latch and Sensor Status Using Radio Frequency Identification" filed Sep. 21, 2005, which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates generally to radio frequency identification (RFID) systems, and more particularly, to systems and methods for monitoring components using RFID systems.

[0003] Component monitoring for transportation vehicles, for example, airplanes, is essential to ensure safety, security, and operational readiness. At least some airlines rely on personnel to physically inspect doors, latches, and containers to verify their status and location. However, relying on the skill level of the inspector may result in errors and/or the expenditure of significant man hours. Currently, life vests can be detected on the airplane by attaching an RFID tag onto the vest. By this method, an RFID reader can detect the plurality of life vests on the airplane, and by counting, can determine that all required vests are on the plane. This does not determine that all vests are properly stowed, as stolen items placed in passengers' baggage are still detected. Further, numerous signals are received from all the RFID tags attached to all the various types of equipment present, and the desired signals may be difficult to differentiate.

[0004] Currently, life vest tampering can be detected by placing a frangible RFID tag on the life vest pocket, such that removing the life vest destroys the RFID tag. Again, an RFID reader can detect the life vests on the airplane, and can, by counting, verify that all the required vests are present and not tampered with. In this case, a hand-held short range RFID tag reader can be used to find the tampered life vest pocket by looking for the absence of an RFID response from the tampered seat group. The stolen vest cannot be detected at all, and the problem of multiple signals remains.

[0005] Other airlines rely on elaborate system of wired sensors positioned throughout the airplane. Each door, latch, and component may be wired to visually or audibly to notify flight personnel regarding their status. However, wired systems add weight and complexity to the design of airplanes.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0006] In one embodiment, a system for monitoring a vehicle includes at least one radio frequency identification (RFID) system comprising at least one transceiver and a plurality of RFID tags, the tags coupled to a plurality of vehicle components, a plurality of vehicle component retaining assemblies coupled to the plurality of components and operatively configured to substantially shield the amount of radio frequency (RF) energy received from the transceiver by each tag in a first position and unshield each tag in a second position, and an alert system for receiving information regarding the plurality of vehicle components and for generating an alert based on the information received.

[0007] In another embodiment, a method for monitoring vehicle components includes coupling at least one RFID tag to at least one vehicle component, coupling at least one RFID transceiver configured to emit an RF energy within the vehicle to the at least one tag, shielding an amount of RF energy received by the at least one tag such that the at least one tag can not transmit to the at least one transceiver, and coupling an alert system for receiving information from the at least one transceiver.

[0008] In yet another embodiment, a monitoring system for a plurality of airplane components includes a radio frequency identification (RFID) system comprising at least one of a RFID tag and a RFID transceiver, each positioned within a fuselage of the airplane, said tag coupled to at least one of an airplane component, and at least one radio frequency (RF) energy shield extending circumferentially around said at least one RFID tag such that RF energy directed from said RFID transceiver is blocked or detuned when said at least one RF energy shield is in a first position.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] FIG. 1 is a schematic side view of an exemplary fuselage of an aircraft 10 in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

[0010] FIG. 2 is a perspective view of a portion of the RFID component status monitoring system shown in FIG. 1 that may be used to monitor a lavatory area;

[0011] FIG. 3 is a perspective view of an exemplary latch that may be used with the lavatory area portion of the system shown in FIG. 2;

[0012] FIG. 4 is a perspective view of a portion of the RFID component status monitoring system shown in FIG. 1 that may be used to monitor a galley area;

[0013] FIG. 5 is a perspective view of an exemplary latch that may be used with the galley area portion of system shown in FIG. 4; and

[0014] FIG. 6 is a perspective view of an exemplary RFID enabled tag that may be used with the various embodiments of the system shown in FIG. 1.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0015] As used herein a shield refers to an object configured to interrupt, obstruct, or otherwise degrade or limit the effective performance of an RFID transponder assembly. Although many objects are capable of interrupting, obstructing, or otherwise degrading or limiting the effective performance of an RFID transponder assemblies, only items configured to perform this function are referred to as shields.

[0016] Many specific details of certain embodiments of the invention are set forth in the following description in order to provide a thorough understanding of such embodiments. One skilled in the art, however, will understand that the present invention may have additional embodiments, or that the present invention may be practiced without several of the details described in the following description.

[0017] FIG. 1 is a schematic side view of an exemplary fuselage of an aircraft 10 in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. Aircraft 10 includes an RFID

component status monitoring system **12** that includes at least one RFID reader **14** positioned at a predetermined corresponding number of locations within aircraft **10**. Typically such locations are a lavatory area **16** and a galley area **18**. Additional readers **14** may be positioned at further locations depending upon the monitoring needs of a particular aircraft model or other type of vehicle. A plurality of aircraft access doors **20** includes respective latches **22** for maintaining access door closed and sealed during a flight. RFID component status monitoring system **12** includes an alert system **24** for receiving information regarding a plurality of vehicle components, for example, but not limited to, access doors **20**, latches **22**, and stowable components such as life jackets, and other personnel protective equipment, and for generating an alert based on the information received.

[0018] FIG. 2 is a perspective view of a portion of RFID component status monitoring system **12** (shown in FIG. 1) that may be used to monitor lavatory area **16**. In the exemplary embodiment, system **12** is configured to monitor an aircraft door latch status. Although FIG. 2 illustrates system **12** in the context of lavatory doors and latches, it is to be understood that the present invention is a system and method for reporting door, cabinet, and food cart latch status over a wireless link to the airplane avionics, eliminating the complex wiring and sensors used in traditional implementations providing a reduction in system complexity, wiring and weight.

[0019] In addition, some door latches are linked to signs indicating the status or condition of the door. System **12** includes a plurality of RFID tags **102**, **104**, each coupled to a respective door **106**, **108** of a lavatory **110**, **112**. System **12** also includes RFID antennas **116**, **114**, and RFID reader **14** that are complementary to RFID tags **102**, **104**. In the exemplary embodiment, system **12** monitors a door latch status of each latch on a respective lavatory door **106**, **108**. The latch status drives occupied/unoccupied signage on an aircraft and also provides an indication to the aircraft avionics for situational awareness for both pilots and flight attendants. RFID reader **14** is located proximate to lavatory area **16** to be monitored. In the exemplary embodiment, RFID readers **14** are placed above the ceiling panels **118** and reader antennas **114** and **116** are incorporated into ceiling panels **118**, under carpet **120**, and/or into the laminate used on the monuments to be monitored. Because reader antennas **114**, **116** are able to be manufactured out of etched metal, copper tape, or thin wire; they can easily be incorporated into the space between a floor panel **122** and carpet **120**, and onto the backside of ceiling panels **118** or decorative laminates used on most monuments.

[0020] FIG. 3 is a perspective view of an exemplary latch **300** that may be used with the lavatory area **16** portion of system **12** (shown in FIG. 2). Latch **300** includes a bolt portion **302** configured to engage a slot (not shown) in a jamb (not shown) of door **106**, **108**. Bolt portion **302** is positioned within door **106**, **108** adjacent a peripheral edge of door **106**, **108**. Bolt portion **302** is coupled to a knob **304** extending away from bolt portion **302** such that bolt **302** is actuated through a slot **306** in an inside surface of door **106**, **108**.

[0021] Bolt **302** includes a shield **307** extending from a side of bolt **302**. Shield **307** blocks RF energy in the frequencies used by RFID tag **102**, **104**, for example, by

creating a faraday cage. In another embodiment, shield **307** detunes the RFID tag antenna sufficiently to prevent normal function. Moreover, shield **307** may be formed from an RF-opaque material, for example, carbon fiber. Bolt **302** is translatable between a first unlatched position **308** and a second latched position **310**. An RFID enabled component such as an RFID tag **102**, **104** is coupled to door **106**, **108** proximate latch **300** and in alignment with a path of shield **307** as bolt **302** is moved between first position **308** and second position **310**.

[0022] In the exemplary embodiment, lavatory latch status is read without the traditional wiring and door contact sensors using RFID tag **102**, **104** and shield **307**. RFID tag **102**, **104** is located adjacent the latch **300** such that tag **102**, **104** is uncovered when bolt **302** is in position **308** and covered when bolt **302** is in position **310**. Such configuration permits tag **102**, **104** to receive enough energy to transmit only when RFID tag **102**, **104** is in unlatched position **308**.

[0023] An optional second RFID tag **314** is coupled to door **106**, **108** proximate latch **300** and in alignment with a path of shield **307** as bolt **302** is moved between second position **310** and first position **308**. The RFID tags transmit different codes such that system **12** recognizes the position of bolt **302** from the received code.

[0024] FIG. 4 is a perspective view of a portion **400** of RFID component status monitoring system **12** (shown in FIG. 1) that may be used to monitor galley area **18**. The galley area portion of system **12** includes a reader **402** mounted between an interior panel **404** and the skin **406** of aircraft **10**. System **12** also includes one or more reader antenna **408**, which may be positioned above interior panel **404** and/or under carpet **410**.

[0025] FIG. 5 is a perspective view of an exemplary latch **500** that may be used with the galley area **18** portion of system **12** (shown in FIG. 4). Food carts and cabinet latch status for galley area **18** is monitored using a galley area portion of system **12** that is substantially similar to the lavatory area portion of system **12** (shown in FIG. 2). In the exemplary embodiment, a standard food cart latch **500** includes a rotatable bolt **504** coupled to a knob **506** is used. An RFID enabled component such as an RFID tag **508** is coupled to a food cart **510** in a position where RFID tag **508** is uncovered by bolt **504** when bolt **504** is in a first unlatched position **508** and is covered by bolt **504** when bolt **504** is in a second latched position **510**. In the exemplary embodiment, RFID tag **508** comprises a peel and stick substrate that is adhesively coupled to food cart **510**. In various alternative embodiments, a shield plate is coupled to an edge of a door, such that an associated RFID tag is shielded or detuned when the door is in the closed position, and exposed to an RFID reader when the door is in the open position.

[0026] System **12** is also configured to detect a missing component such as a line replaceable unit (LRU), by placing a shield plate onto the edge of the LRU mounting tray, such that the RFID tag is shielded or detuned when the LRU is present, and exposed to an RFID reader when the LRU is removed or incompletely installed.

[0027] In an alternative embodiment, an unfastened seat belt can be detected if an RFID tag is placed in the one half of the buckle such that the RFID tag is shielded when the two halves of the buckle are joined together.

[0028] FIG. 6 is a perspective view of an exemplary RFID enabled tag 600 that may be used with the various embodiments of system 12 described above. In the exemplary embodiment, RFID enabled tag 600 includes a substrate 602. An RFID device 604 is coupled to a surface 605 of substrate 602. In an alternative embodiment, device 604 is coupled to a recess 606 formed in surface 605 of substrate 602. In another alternative embodiment, device 604 is embedded in an interior of substrate 602. RFID enabled tag 600 also includes a shield 608 coupled to surface 605. Shield 608 shields or detunes RFID device 604 from an RFID reader (not shown). In the exemplary embodiment, shield 608 is formed of a metallic foil that is weakly coupled to surface 605 using an adhesive 610 such that a pulling or shearing action between shield 608 and surface 605 would separate them and expose RFID device 604 to an RFID reader.

[0029] In another alternative embodiment, an improperly stowed device or missing device can be detected, such as a missing life preserver, fire extinguisher, life raft or other device by attaching an RFID tag to the carrying tray for the device, and a foil metal shield onto the device being protected. As described above, the RFID tag is shielded or detuned when the equipment is properly stowed, and exposed to an RFID tag reader when removed. Accordingly, system 12 permits an instantaneous high confidence test of the presence of life vests on the aircraft prior to an overseas flight, thus reducing aircraft turn time.

[0030] For removable or frequently stolen equipment like life vests, it may be desirable to attach the RFID tag to the equipment, and the shield onto the carrier. With this alternate method, a wide range RFID reader within the cabin detects the theft, and a hand held short range RFID reader detects the stolen equipment, wherever it has been hidden.

[0031] In an alternative embodiment, system 12 is configured detect exposure to solvents or water. For example, by manufacturing RFID tag 600 with adhesive 610 configured to de-bond and permit shield 608 to peel away from substrate 602 in the presence of the solvent or water, thereby exposing RFID device 604 to detection by a reader.

[0032] In another alternative embodiment, system 12 is configured detect exposure to high temperatures. For example, by manufacturing RFID tag 600 with adhesive 610 configured to de-bond and permit shield 608 to peel away from substrate 602 in the presence of high temperatures, thereby exposing RFID device 604 to detection by a reader.

[0033] The performance of the above described embodiments can be aided by the use of disbond promoters, which react with heat or solvents to push apart the two layers of substrate 602 and shield 608. For example, a heat-sensing disbond promoter includes water filled microspheres that burst when the temperature rises above a predetermined range. At least some known materials become brittle, or liberate gas when exposed to radiation.

[0034] In still another alternative embodiment such materials are used to form an RFID shield that disbonds after exposure to a predetermined dose of radiation. At least some known materials lose structural integrity when corroded. In yet another alternative embodiment such materials are used to form an RFID shield that is sensitive to corrosion.

[0035] In another embodiment, a mass is attached to shield 608 such that a mechanical shock or vibration above a

predetermined level is detected by the shield disbonds above a certain acceleration rate. Such a device is particularly useful for detecting improper handling of sensitive equipment during shipping.

[0036] In another embodiment, a reusable heat detector includes a bimetallic strip configured to couple shield 608 to substrate 602 such that shield 608 is moved away from substrate 602 outside a predetermined temperature range, and moved back to a position covering substrate 602 and RFID device 604 when the temperature returns to the predetermined temperature range.

[0037] In another embodiment, a reusable pressure detector includes a gas-filled mechanism configured to couple shield 608 to substrate 602 such that shield 608 is moved away from substrate 602 outside a predetermined pressure range, and moved back to a position covering substrate 602 and RFID device 604 when the pressure returns to the predetermined pressure range.

[0038] The foregoing description of the exemplary embodiments of the invention are described for the purposes of illustration and are not intended to be exhaustive or limiting to the precise embodiments disclosed. Many modifications and variations are possible in light of the above teaching. It is intended that the scope of the invention be limited not with this detailed description, but rather by the claims appended hereto.

[0039] The above-described methods and systems for identifying aircraft component parts and for mistake proof aircraft maintenance is cost-effective and highly reliable. The system permits monitoring of a plurality of vehicle components without using costly and heavy hard-wired monitoring systems. Accordingly, the methods and systems described herein facilitate operation of vehicles including aircraft in a cost-effective and reliable manner.

[0040] Exemplary embodiments of systems for identifying aircraft component parts and for mistake proof aircraft maintenance are described above in detail. The components of these systems are not limited to the specific embodiments described herein, but rather, components of each system may be utilized independently and separately from other components described herein. Each components of each system can also be used in combination with other component identifying systems.

[0041] While the invention has been described in terms of various specific embodiments, those skilled in the art will recognize that the invention can be practiced with modification within the spirit and scope of the claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A monitoring system for a vehicle, the system comprising:

at least one radio frequency identification (RFID) system comprising at least one transceiver and a plurality of RFID tags, said tags coupled to a plurality of vehicle components;

a plurality of vehicle component retaining assemblies coupled to the plurality of components and operatively configured to substantially shield the amount of radio frequency (RF) energy received from said transceiver by each said tag in a first position and unshield each said tag in a second position; and

an alert system for receiving information regarding said plurality of vehicle components and for generating an alert based on the information received.

2. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 1 wherein each said plurality of retaining assemblies is fabricated from at least one of a RF energy shielding material, an electromagnetic shielding material, and a microwave shielding material.

3. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 1 wherein each said plurality of retaining assemblies is fabricated from at least one of an electrically conductive material, a metallic material, and liquid.

4. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 1 wherein each said plurality of retaining assemblies is fabricated from at least one of a bio-degradable material, a thermo-degradable material, and chemo-degradable material.

5. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 1 wherein each said plurality of retaining assemblies comprises a latching mechanism configured to limit an amount of RF energy received such that each of said tags has insufficient power to send a data signal to said transceiver.

6. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 1 wherein each said plurality of retaining assemblies is rotatably coupled to each of said tags.

7. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 1 wherein each of said tags includes component information including a status, a location, a time/date, and a serial number of each component.

8. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 1 wherein at least one of said tags is coupled to at least one container of components, said container tags include information corresponding to said components within said container.

9. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 1 wherein said alert system is further configured to receive information regarding whether each of said retaining assemblies is in said first or second position and to generate an alert if in said second position.

10. A method for monitoring vehicle components, said method comprising:

coupling at least one RFID tag to at least one vehicle component;

coupling at least one RFID transceiver configured to emit an RF energy within the vehicle to the at least one tag;

shielding an amount of RF energy received by the at least one tag such that the at least one tag can not transmit to the at least one transceiver; and

coupling an alert system for receiving information from the at least one transceiver.

11. A method for monitoring in accordance with claim 10 wherein coupling at least one RFID tag further comprises coupling at least one RFID tag to a container comprising a plurality of components therein.

12. A method for monitoring in accordance with claim 10 wherein coupling at least one RFID tag further comprises coupling at least one RFID tag including data including a status, a location, a time/date, and a serial number of each component.

13. A method for monitoring in accordance with claim 10 wherein coupling at least one RFID transceiver further comprises coupling a plurality of transceivers each compris-

ing a plurality of antennas such that a first antenna is positioned substantially above the at least one tag and a second antenna is positioned substantially below the at least one tag.

14. A method for monitoring in accordance with claim 10 wherein shielding an amount of RF energy further comprises coupling at least one component restraining assembly operatively configured to substantially shield the amount of radio frequency (RF) energy received from the transceiver by the at least one RFID tag when the at least one component restraining assembly is in a first position and unshield each the at least one RFID tag when the at least one component restraining assembly is in a second position.

15. A method for monitoring in accordance with claim 14 wherein coupling at least one component restraining assembly further comprises fabricating the at least one component restraining assembly from at least one of a RF energy shielding material, an electromagnetic shielding material, a microwave shielding material, and an electrical shield material.

16. A method for monitoring in accordance with claim 14 wherein coupling at least one component restraining assembly further comprises coupling at least one of a latching mechanism for at least one of a lavatory door, a gallery door, and a container door.

17. A method for monitoring in accordance with claim 14 wherein coupling an alert system further comprises generating an alert when the at least one component restraining assembly is in the second position.

18. A method for monitoring in accordance with claim 10 wherein coupling an alert system further comprises alerting a user when the RFID transceiver receives a data signal from the at least one RFID tag.

19. A monitoring system for airplane components, said system comprising:

a radio frequency identification (RFID) system comprising at least one of a RFID tag and a RFID transceiver, each positioned within a fuselage of the airplane, said tag coupled to at least one of an airplane component; and

at least one radio frequency (RF) energy shield extending circumferentially around said at least one RFID tag such that RF energy directed from said RFID transceiver is blocked or detuned when said at least one RF energy shield is in a first position.

20. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 19 wherein said at least one RF energy shield is coupled to said at least one RFID tag such that RF energy directed from said RFID transceiver is received by said at least one RFID tag when said RF energy shield is in a second position.

21. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 20 further comprises an alert system configured to receive information from said RFID transceiver regarding the status of each said at least one RFID tag and generate an alert when said RF energy shield is in said second position.

22. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 19 wherein said RF energy shield is rotatably coupled to said at least one RFID tag.

23. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 19 wherein said RF energy shield is a latching mechanism slidably coupled to said at least one RFID tag such that said at least one RFID tag is shielded in a closed or latched position and unshielded when in an open or unlatched position.

24. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 19 wherein each of said at least one tags includes information including a status, a location, a time/date, and a serial number of each of said at least one airplane components.

25. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 19 wherein said RFID transceiver further comprises at least one antenna positioned in a ceiling portion the fuselage and at least one antenna positioned in a floor portion of the fuselage such that said at least one RFID tag is positioned therebetween.

26. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 19 wherein said at least one tag is coupled to an airplane container comprising a plurality of airplane components, wherein each of said at least one tags includes information corresponding to said airplane container.

27. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 26 wherein said container further comprises at least one RFID transceiver antenna positioned adjacent an opening of said container.

28. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 26 wherein said at least one radio frequency (RF) energy shield is fabricated from at least one of a RF energy shielding material, an electromagnetic shielding material, a microwave shielding material, and an electrical shield material.

29. A monitoring system in accordance with claim 21 wherein said alert system is an airplane avionics system configured to alert airplane personnel when said RF energy shield is in said second position.

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