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Szarek et al.

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(45) **Date of Patent: Oct. 13, 2015**

(54) **TILT-BALL TURRET WITH GIMBAL LOCK AVOIDANCE**

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(65) **Prior Publication Data**

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(51) **Int. Cl.**

B64C 39/02	(2006.01)
B64D 47/08	(2006.01)
F16M 11/12	(2006.01)
F16M 11/18	(2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC ***B64C 39/024*** (2013.01); ***B64D 47/08*** (2013.01); ***F16M 11/123*** (2013.01); ***F16M 11/126*** (2013.01); ***F16M 11/18*** (2013.01); *B64C 2201/021* (2013.01); *B64C 2201/123* (2013.01); *B64C 2201/127* (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

CPC B64C 39/024; B64C 2201/127; B64C 2201/021; B64C 2201/123; B64D 47/08; F16M 11/126; F16M 11/123; F16M 11/18

USPC 244/175, 131; 348/151, 211.99, 36; 396/427, 428

See application file for complete search history.

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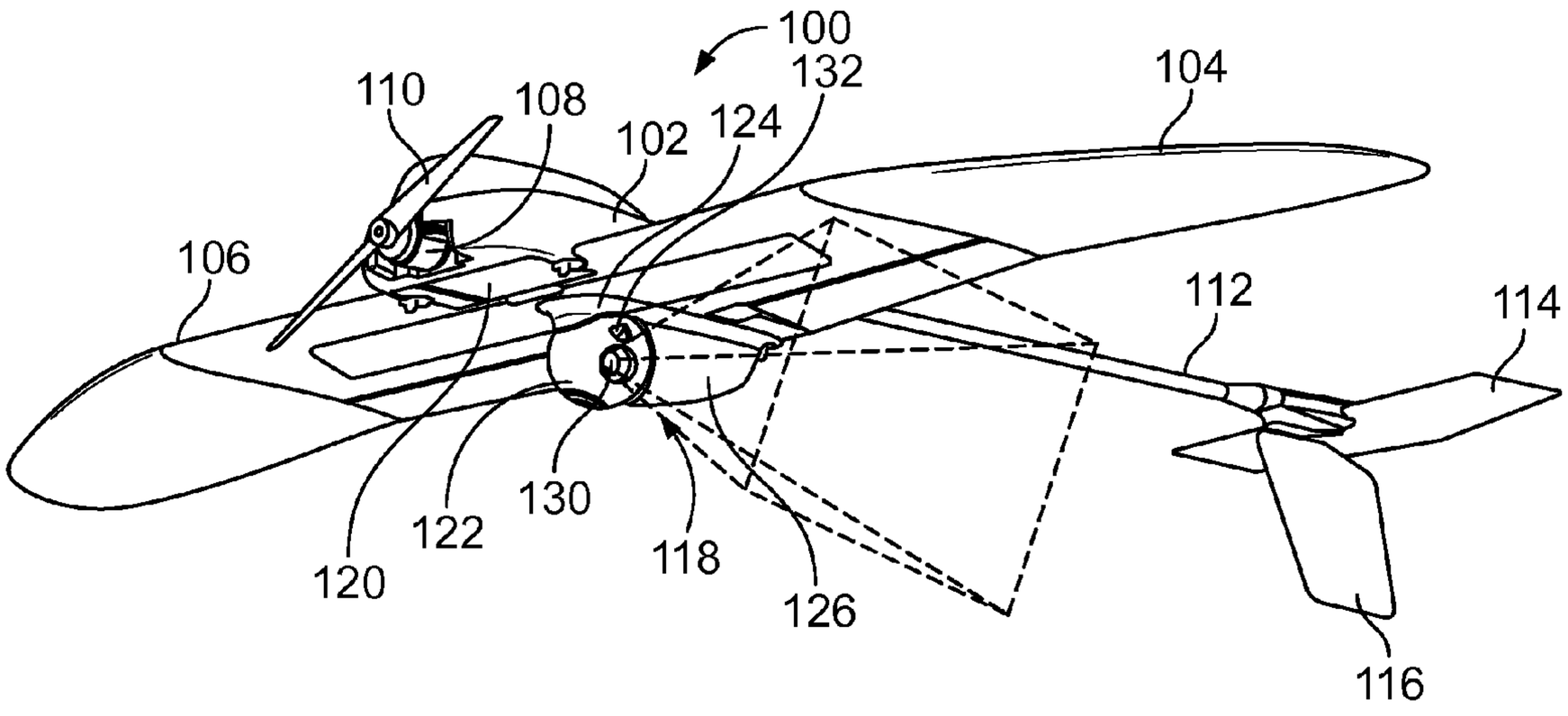
Primary Examiner — Valentina Xavier

(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — Nixon Peabody LLP; Eric Aagaard

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A turret assembly for attachment on the undersurface of an aircraft that reduces performance limitations due to gimbal lock and reduces the cross section profile of the assembly. The assembly includes a roll actuator including a drive shaft. A yoke having a cross member is coupled to the drive shaft and a pair of prongs. The yoke is rotated via the roll actuator and drive shaft along a roll axis oriented substantially parallel to the body of the aircraft. A turret is mounted on the prongs of the yoke. A tilt actuator is contained within the turret. The tilt actuator tilts the turret on a tilt axis relative to the yoke. The tilt axis is perpendicular to the roll axis.

12 Claims, 12 Drawing Sheets



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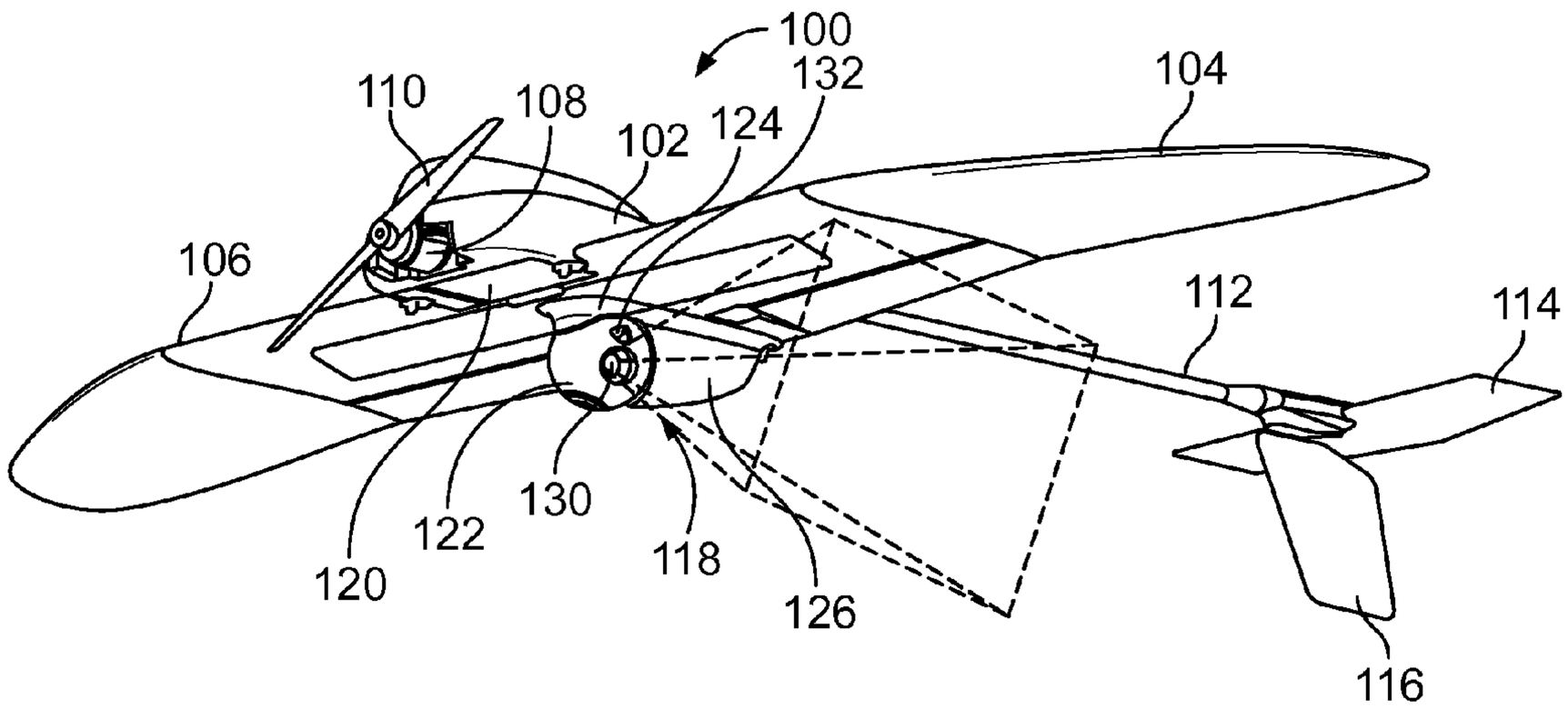

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FIG. 1A

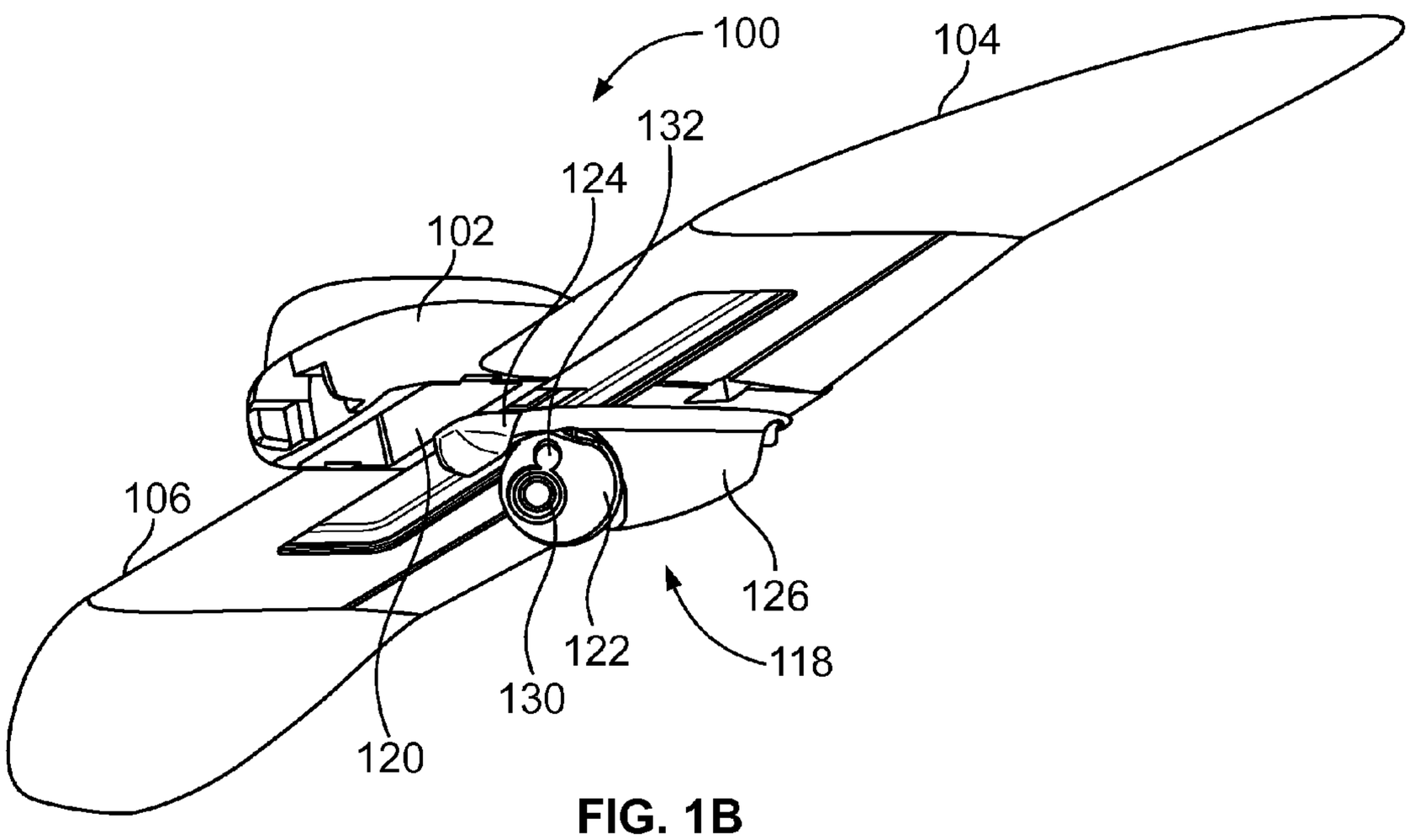

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FIG. 1B

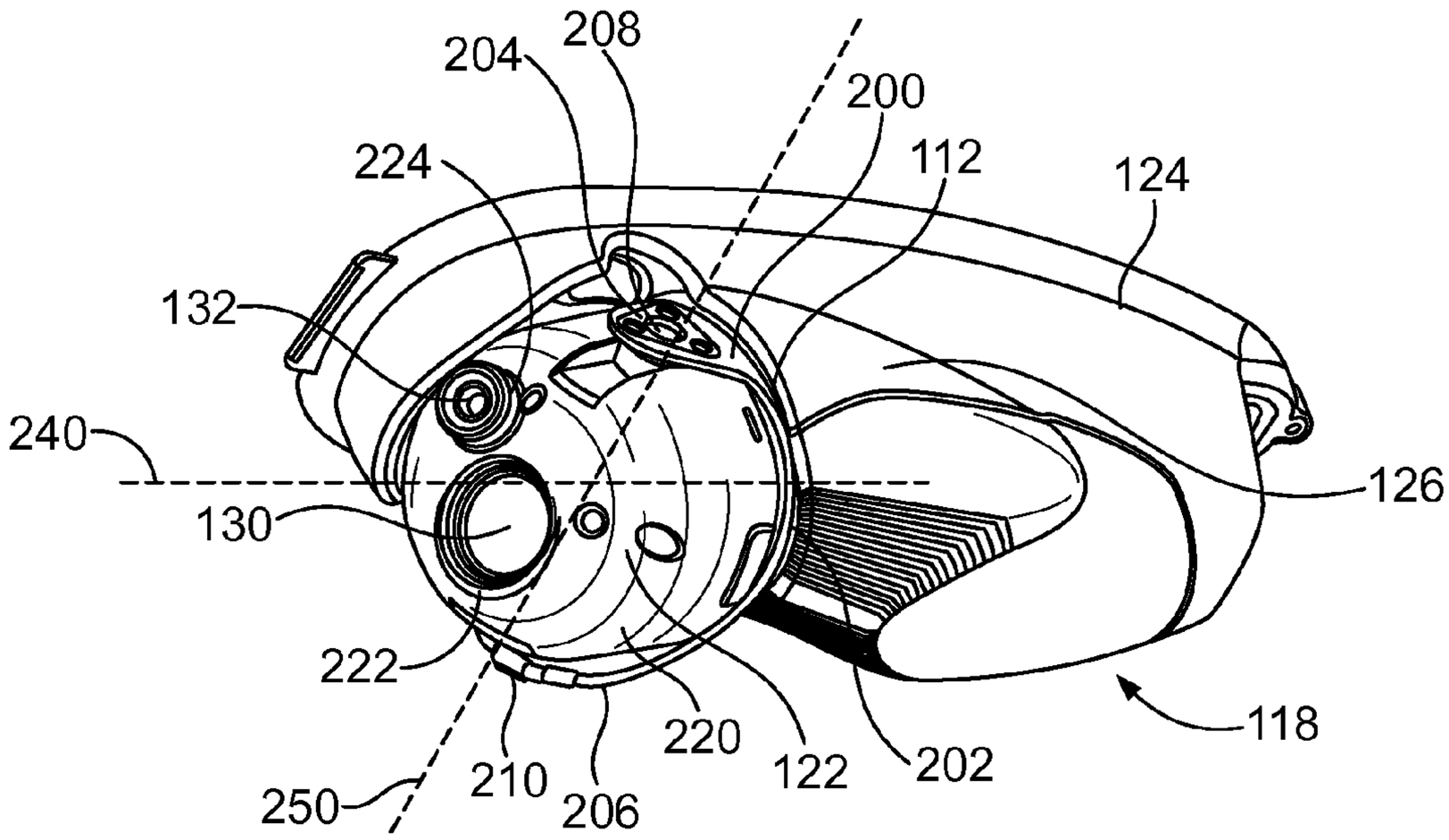


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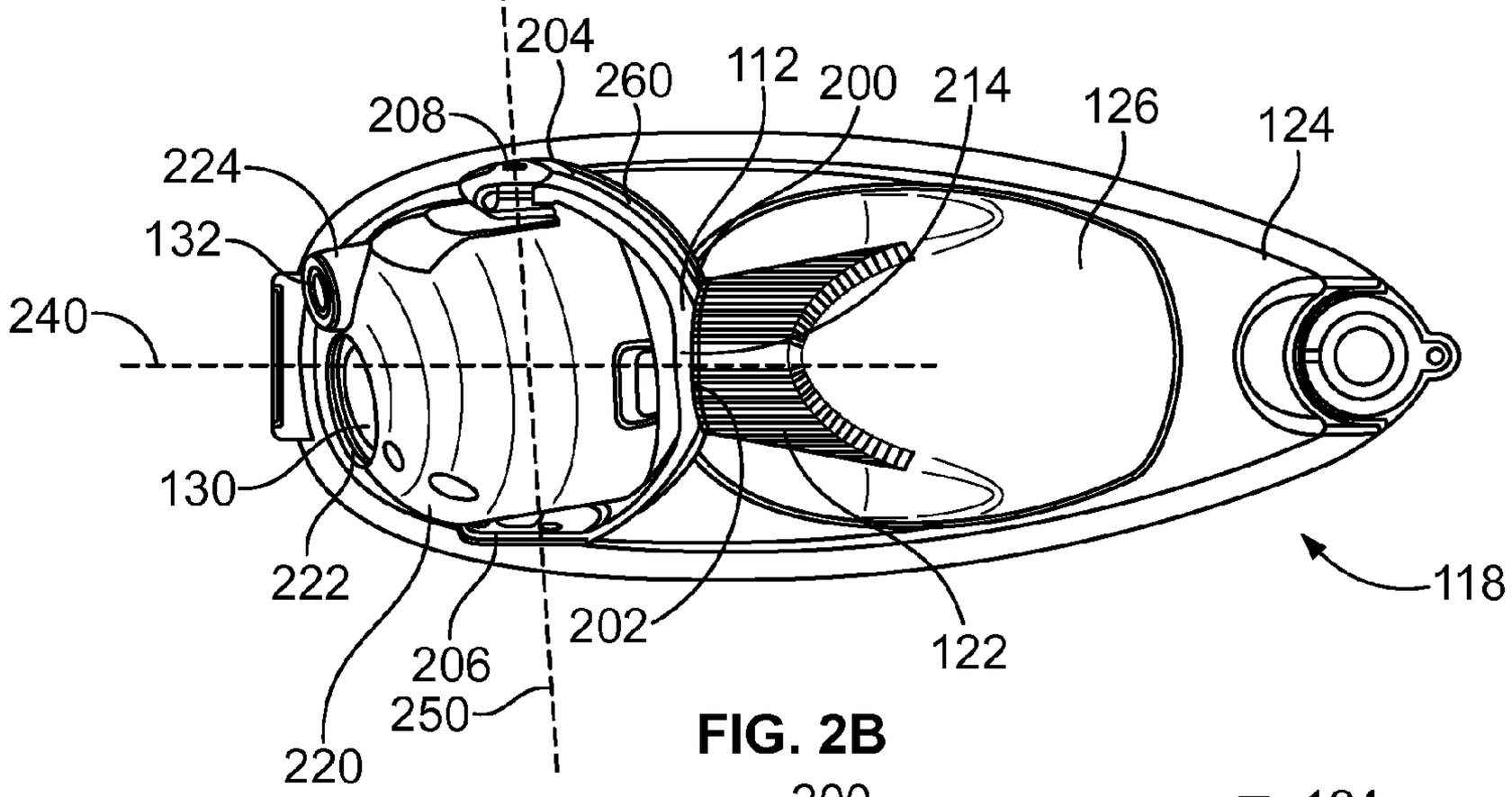


FIG. 2B

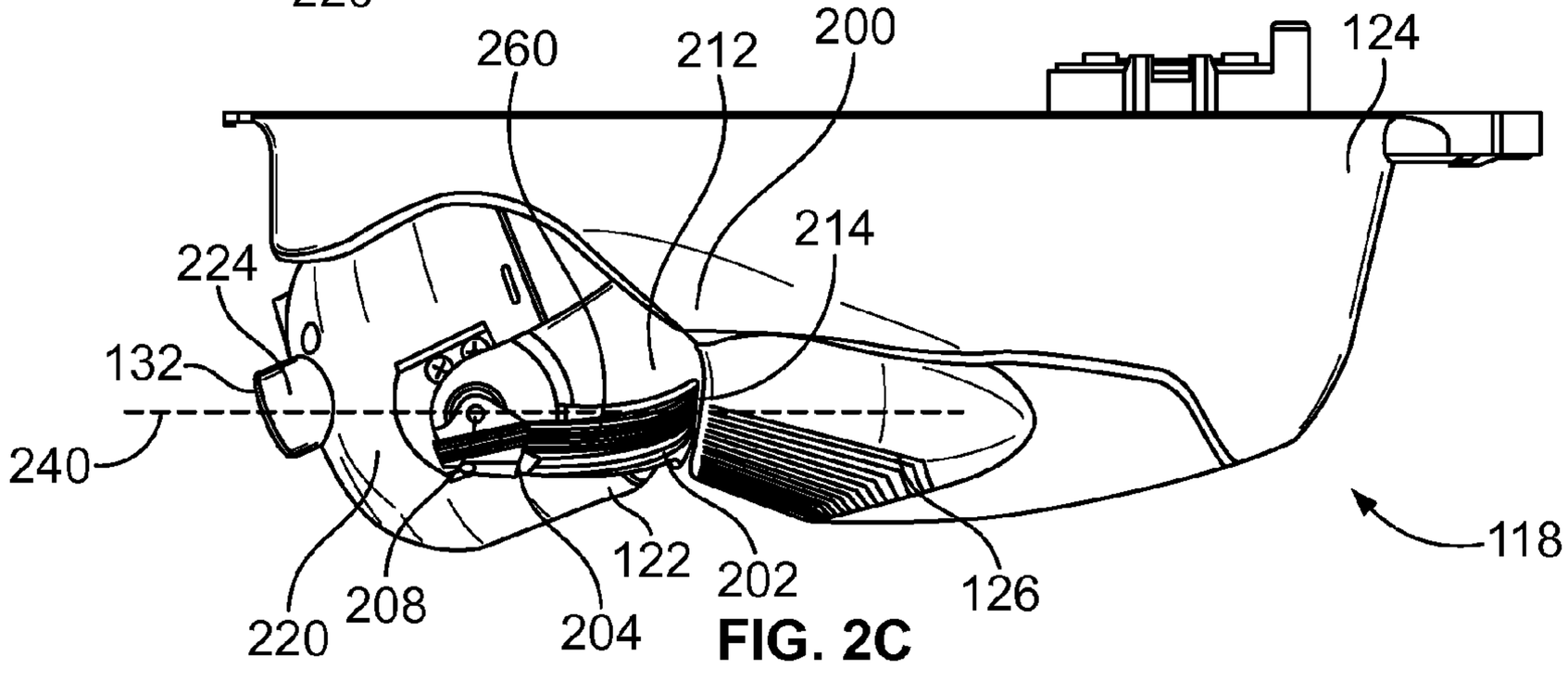


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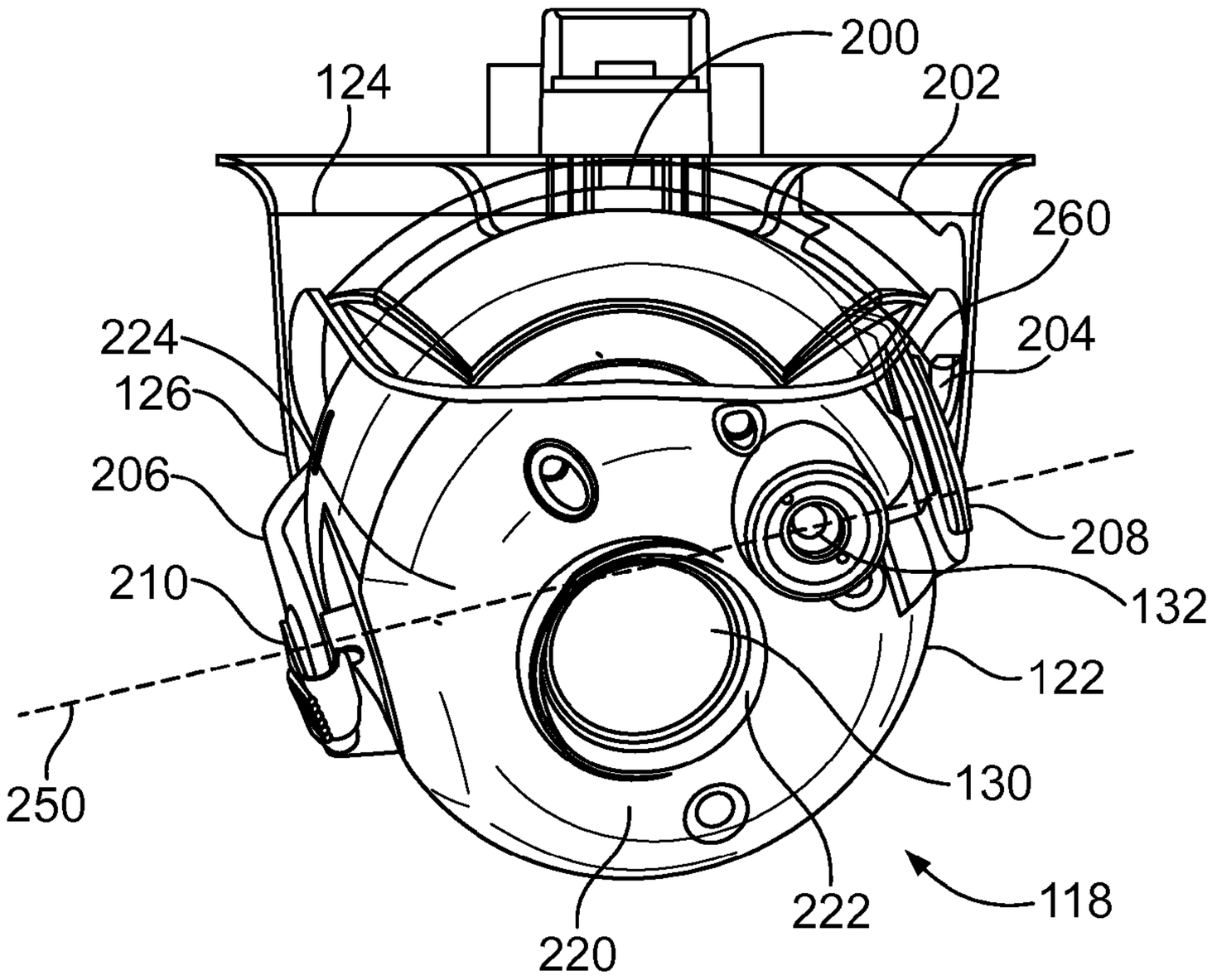

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FIG. 2D

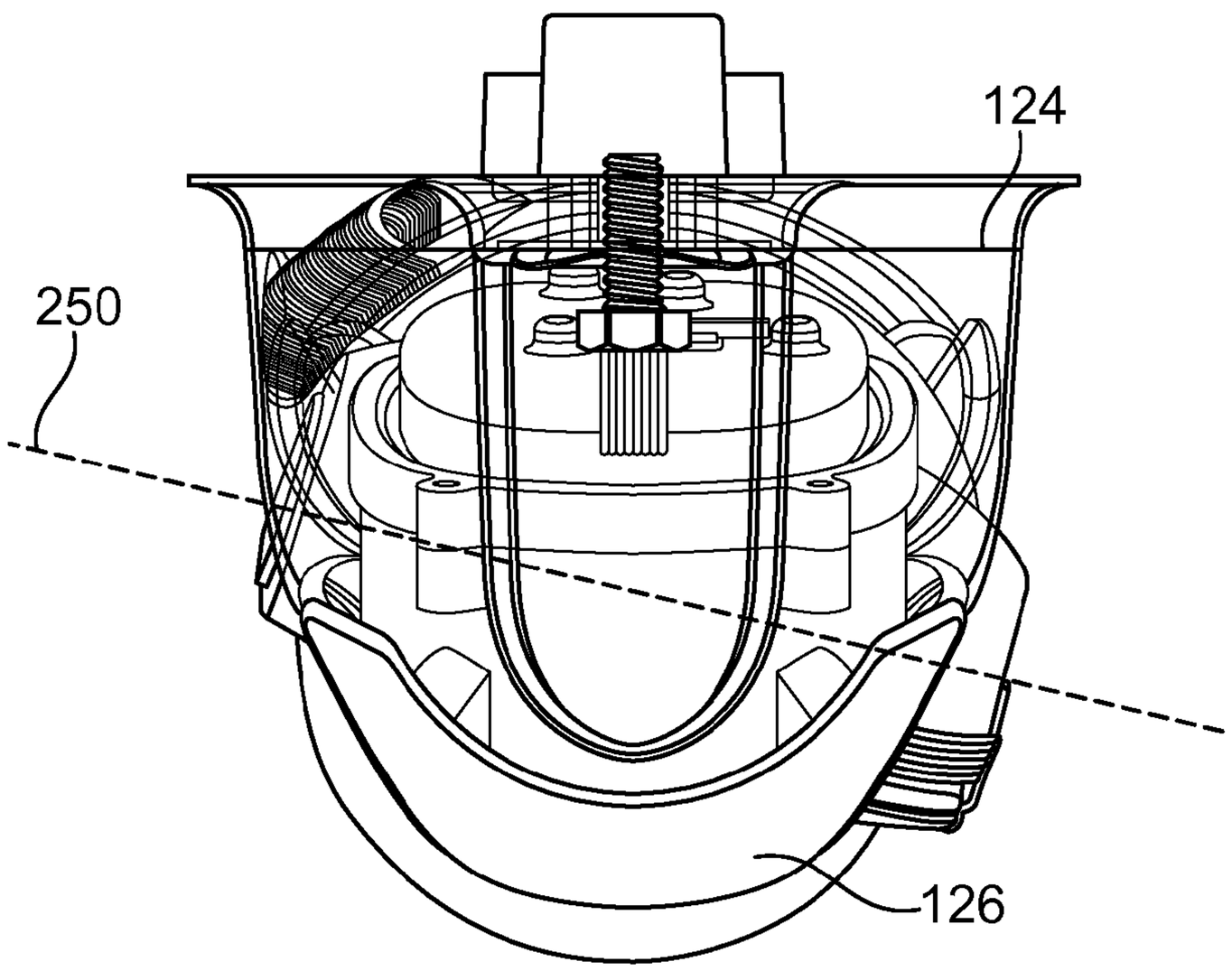

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FIG. 2E

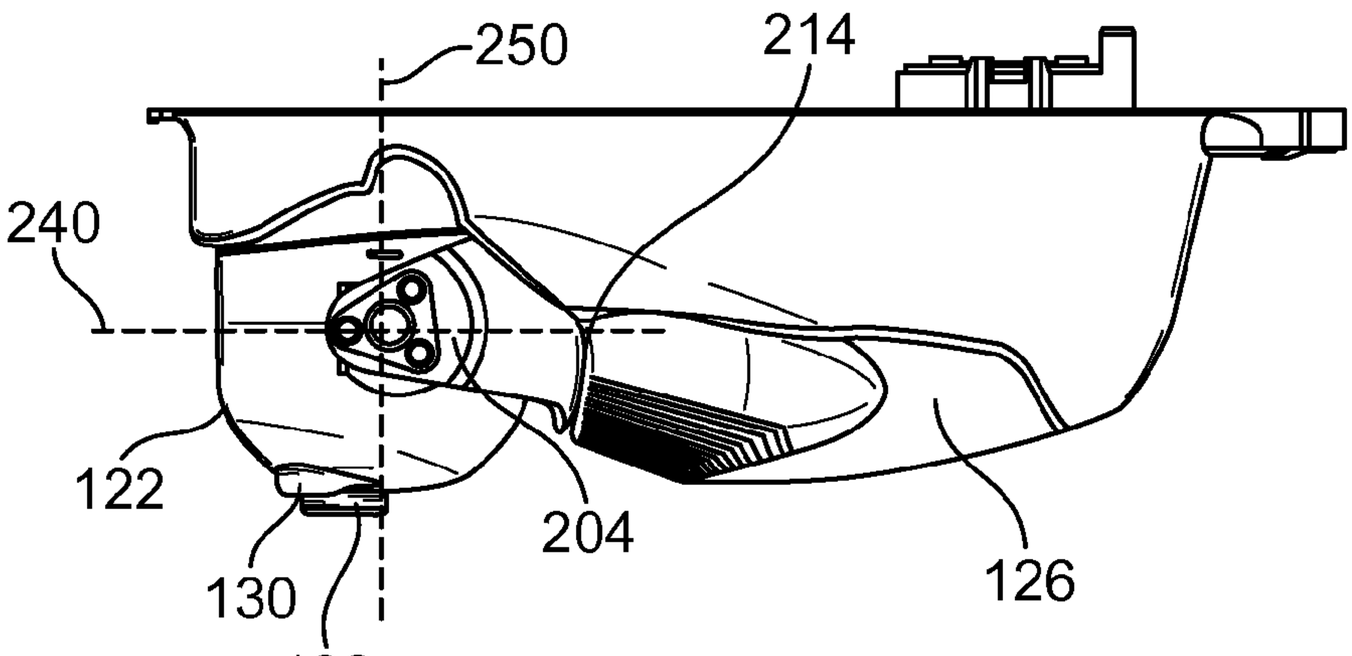


FIG. 3A

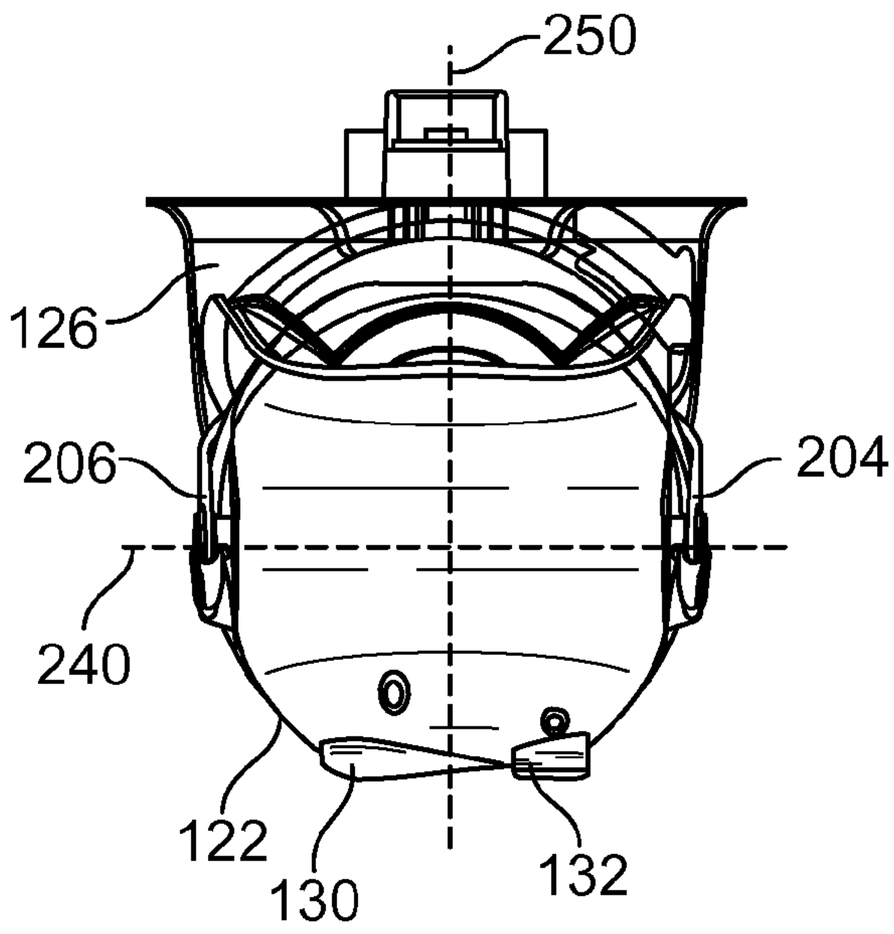


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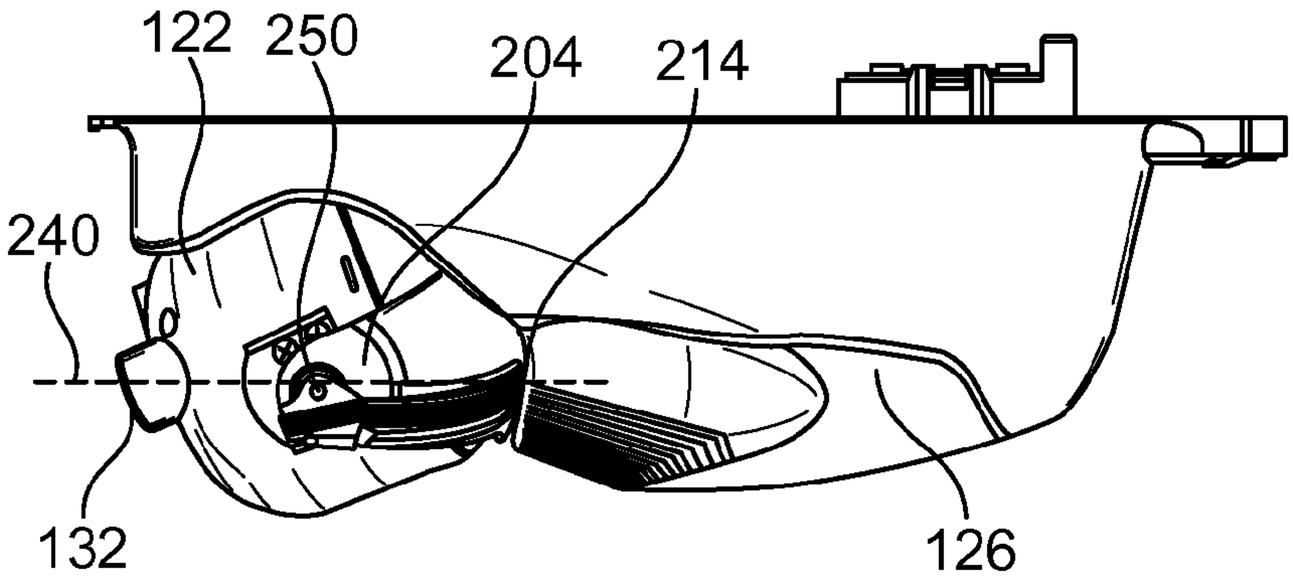


FIG. 3C

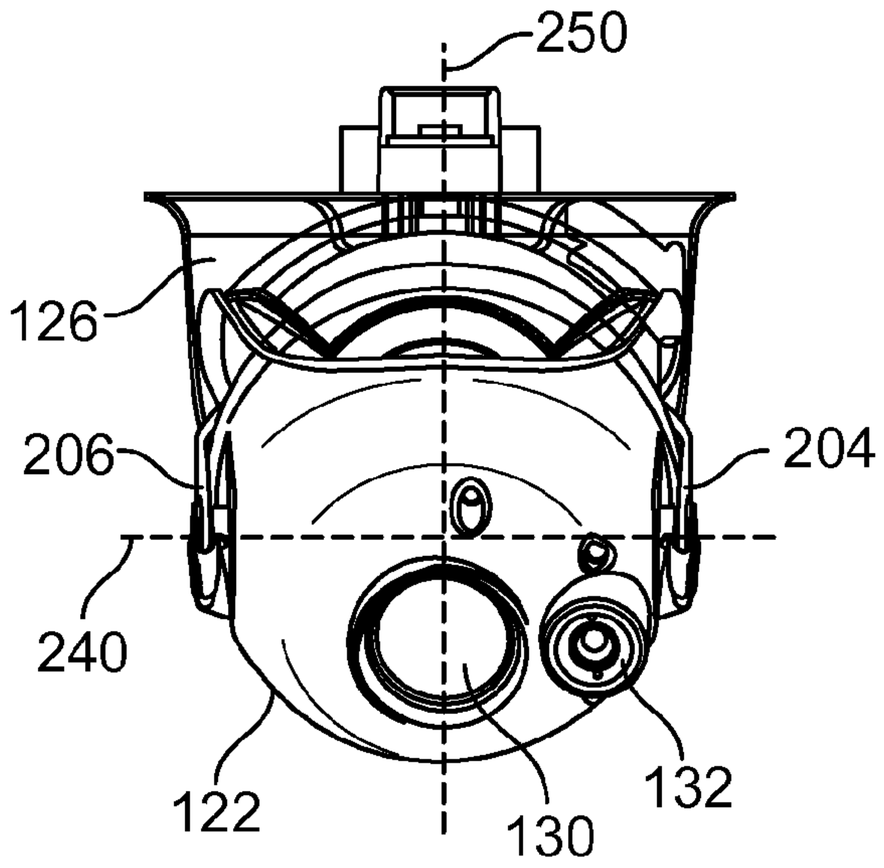


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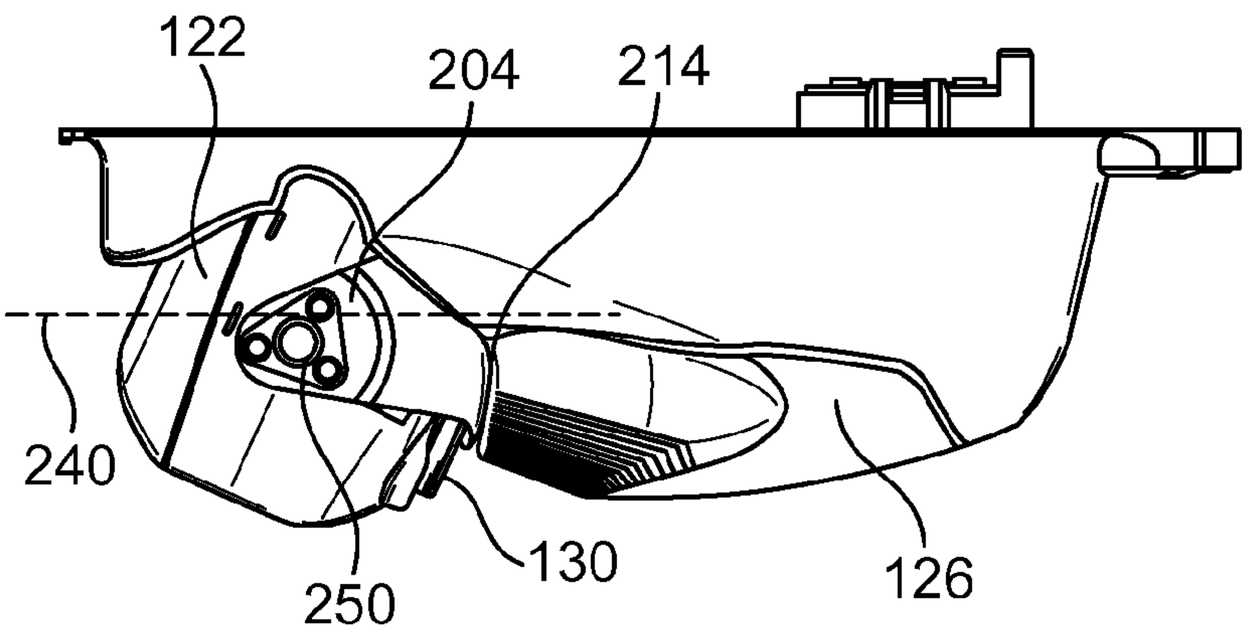


FIG. 3E

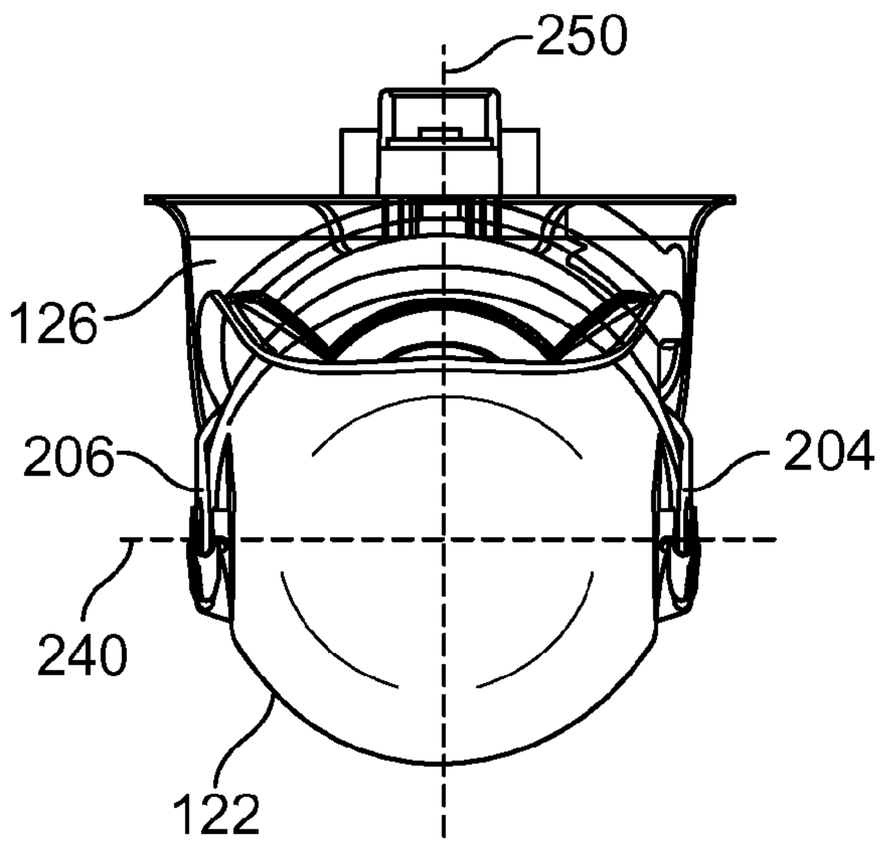


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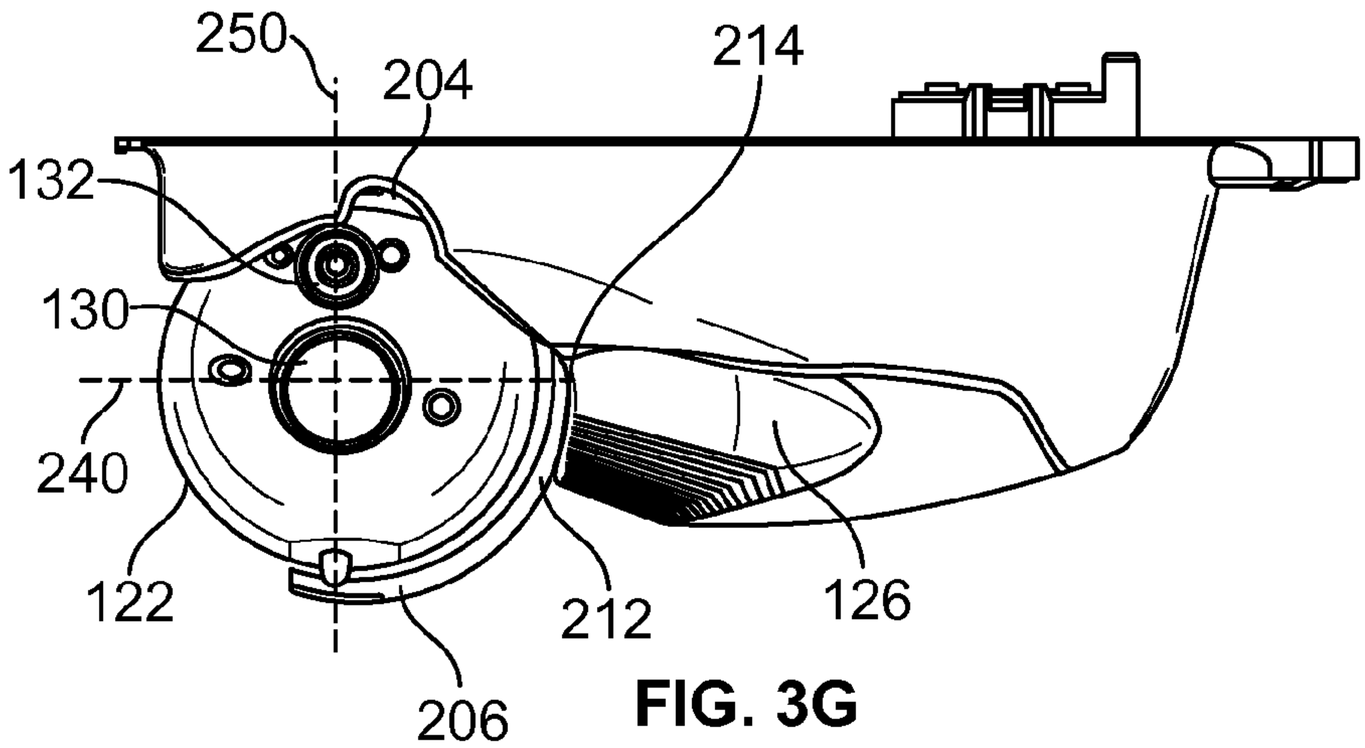


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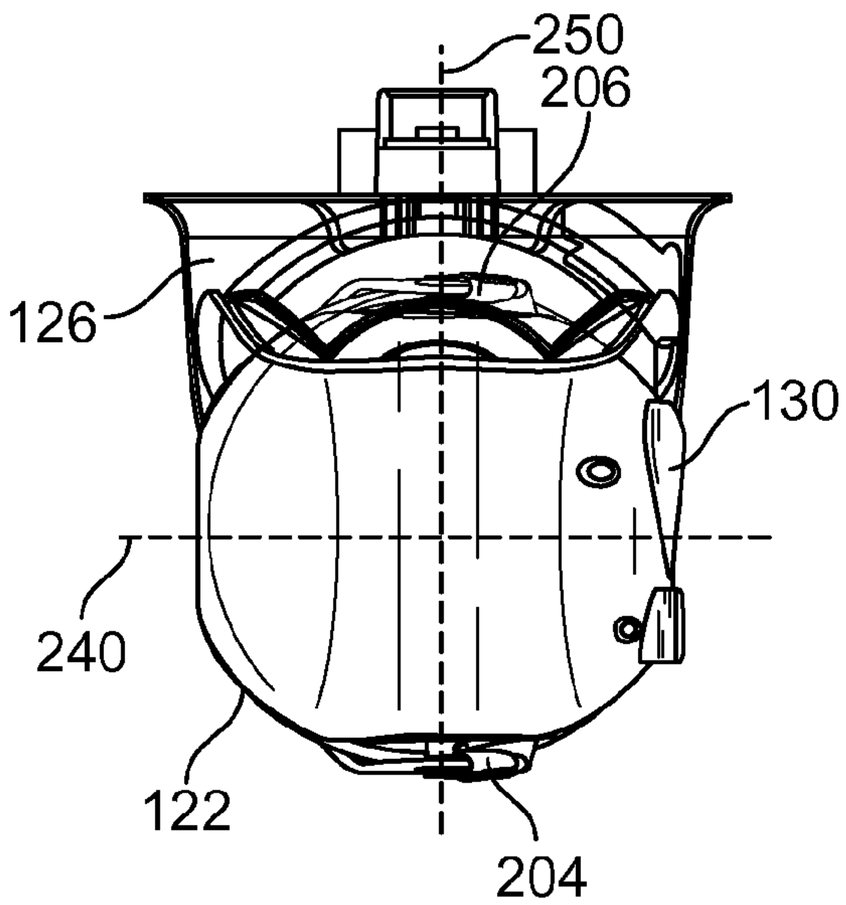


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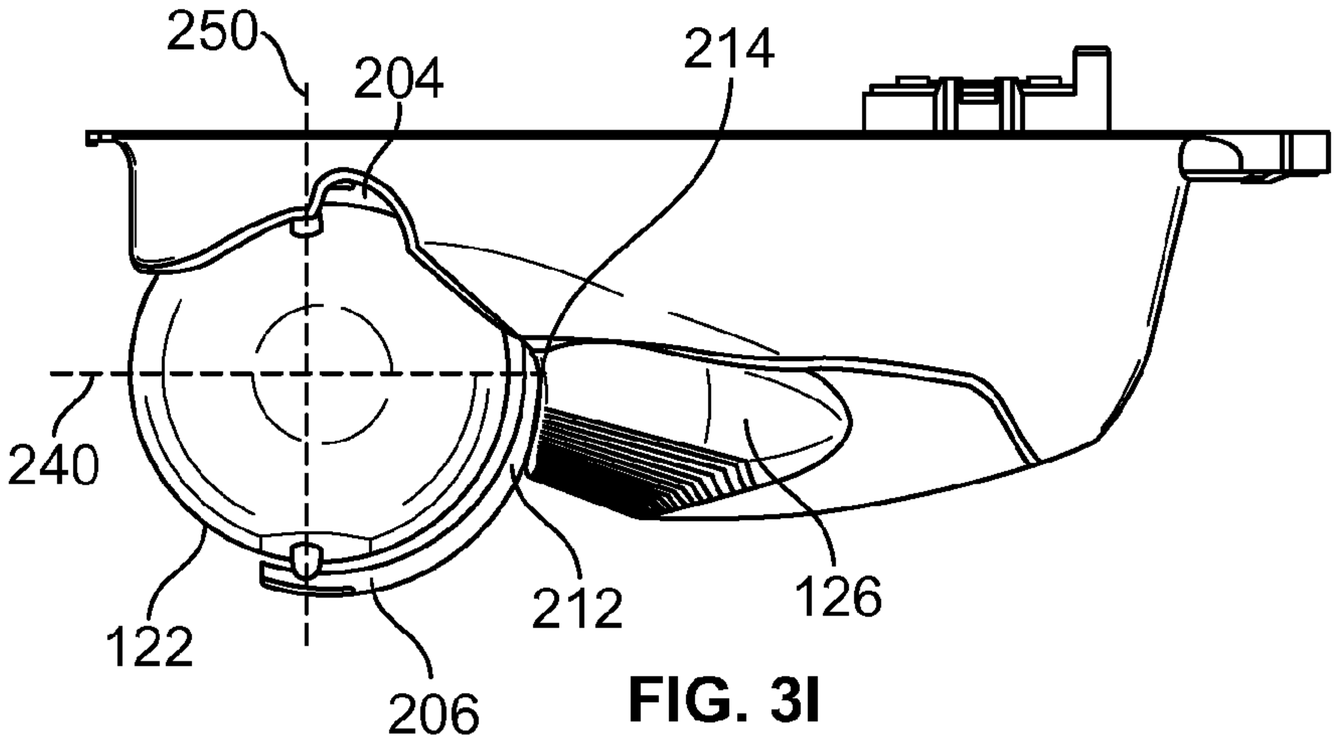


FIG. 3I

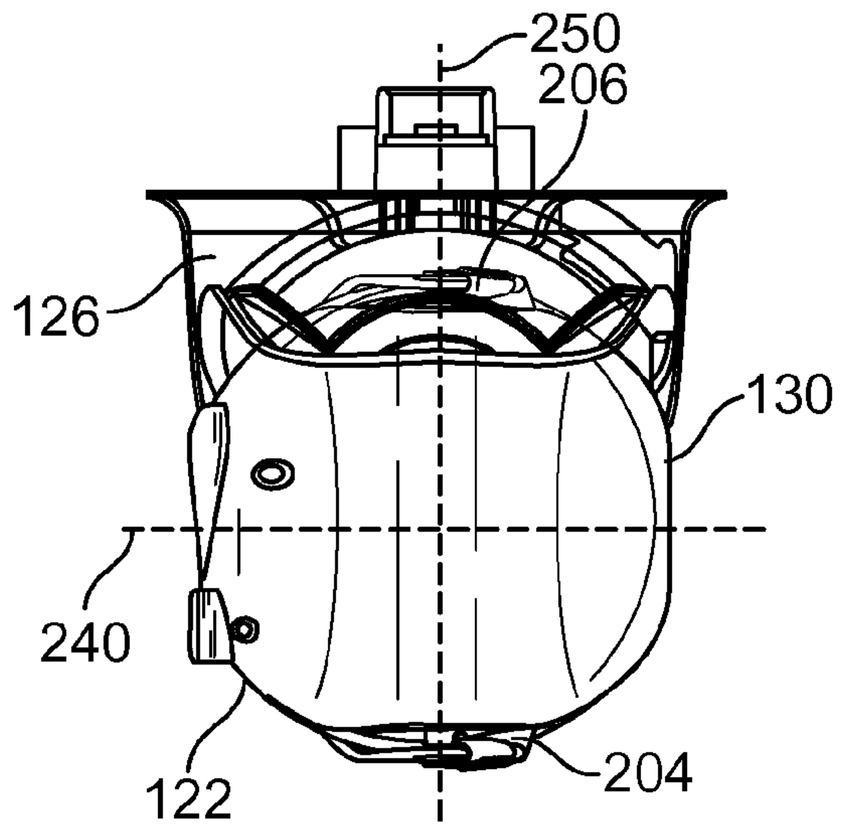


FIG. 3J

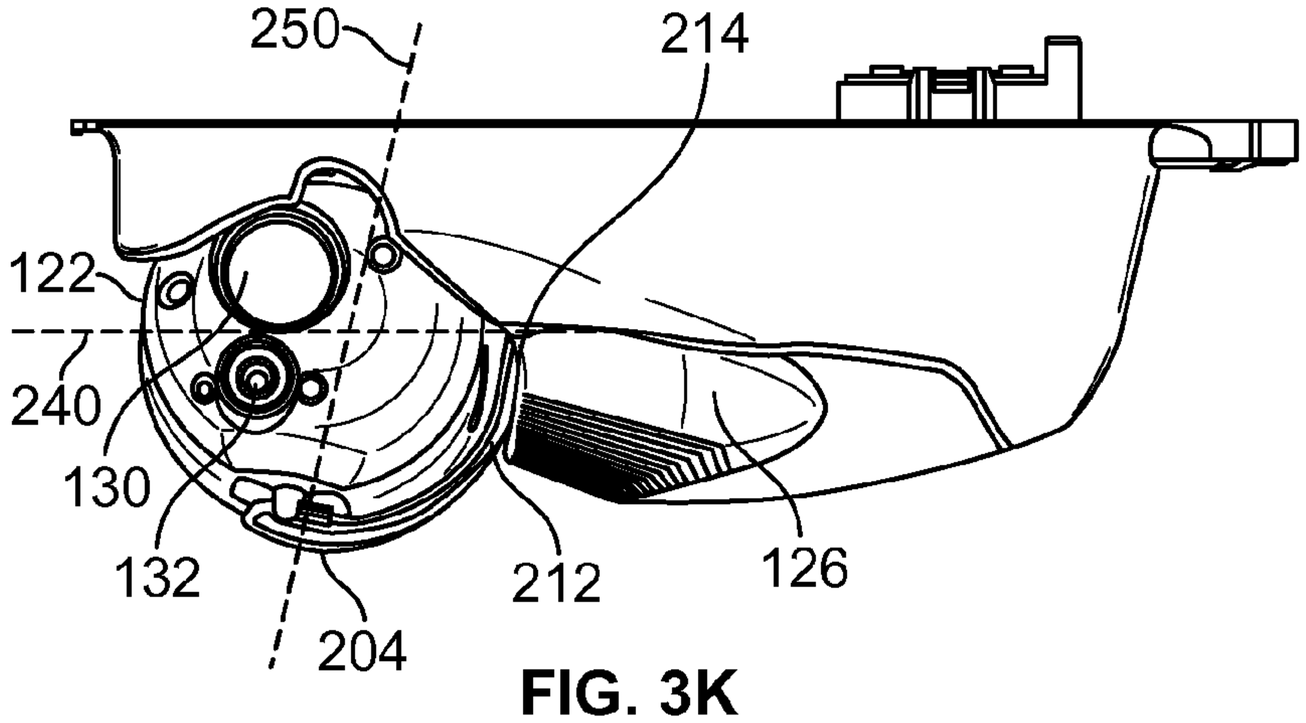


FIG. 3K

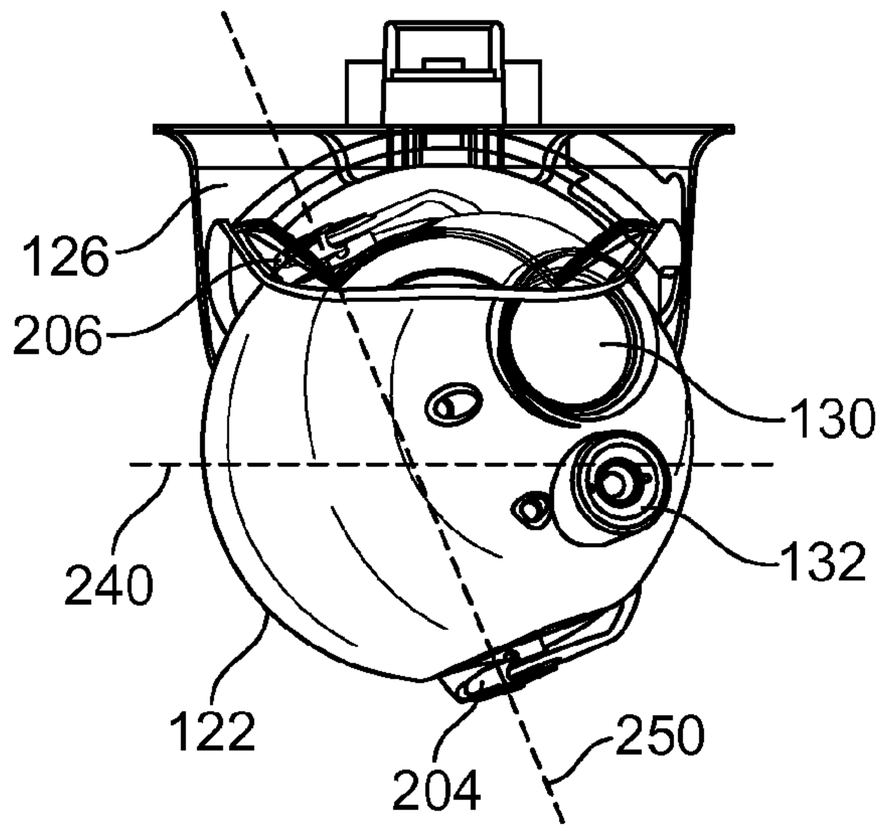


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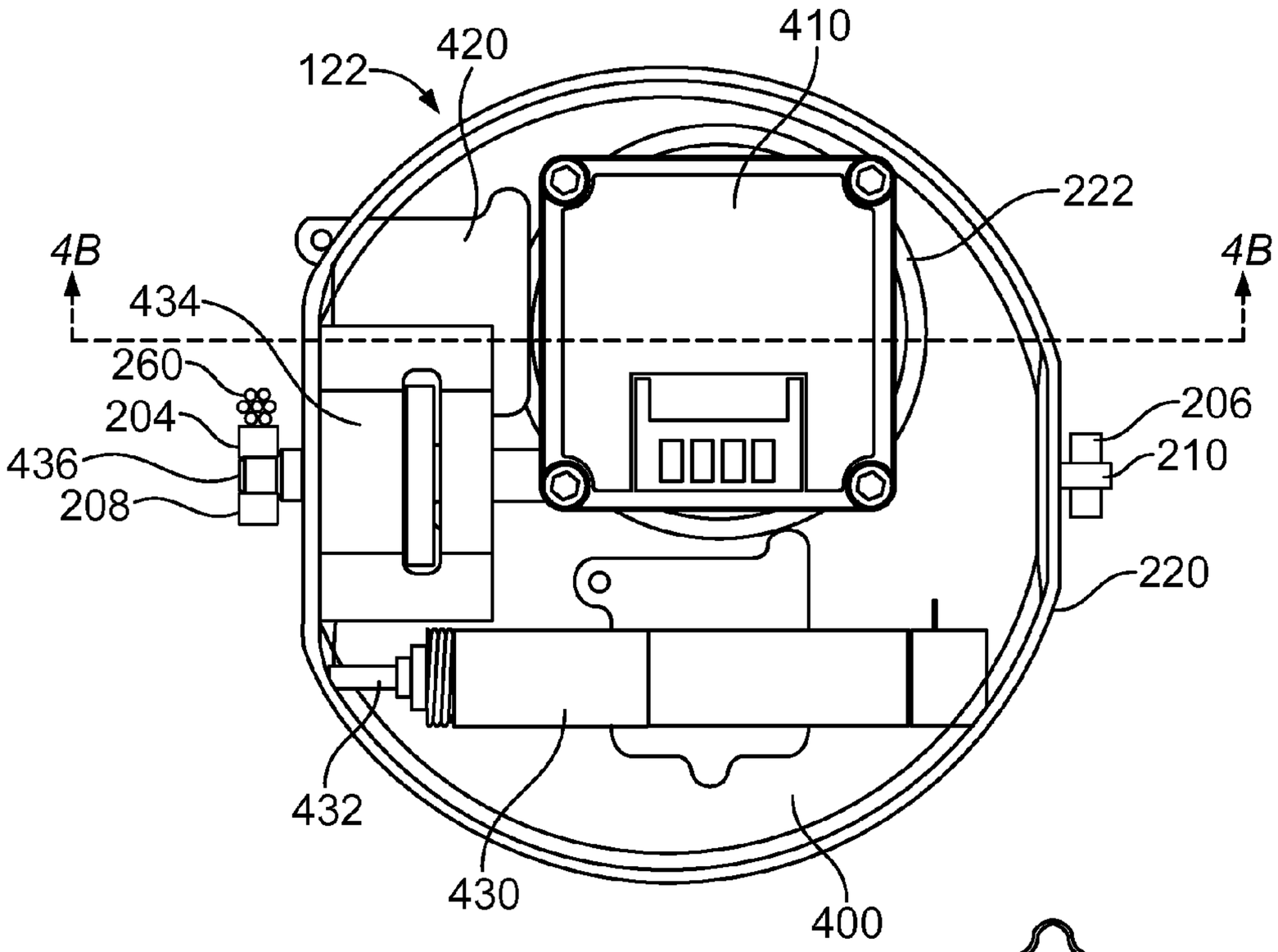


FIG. 4A

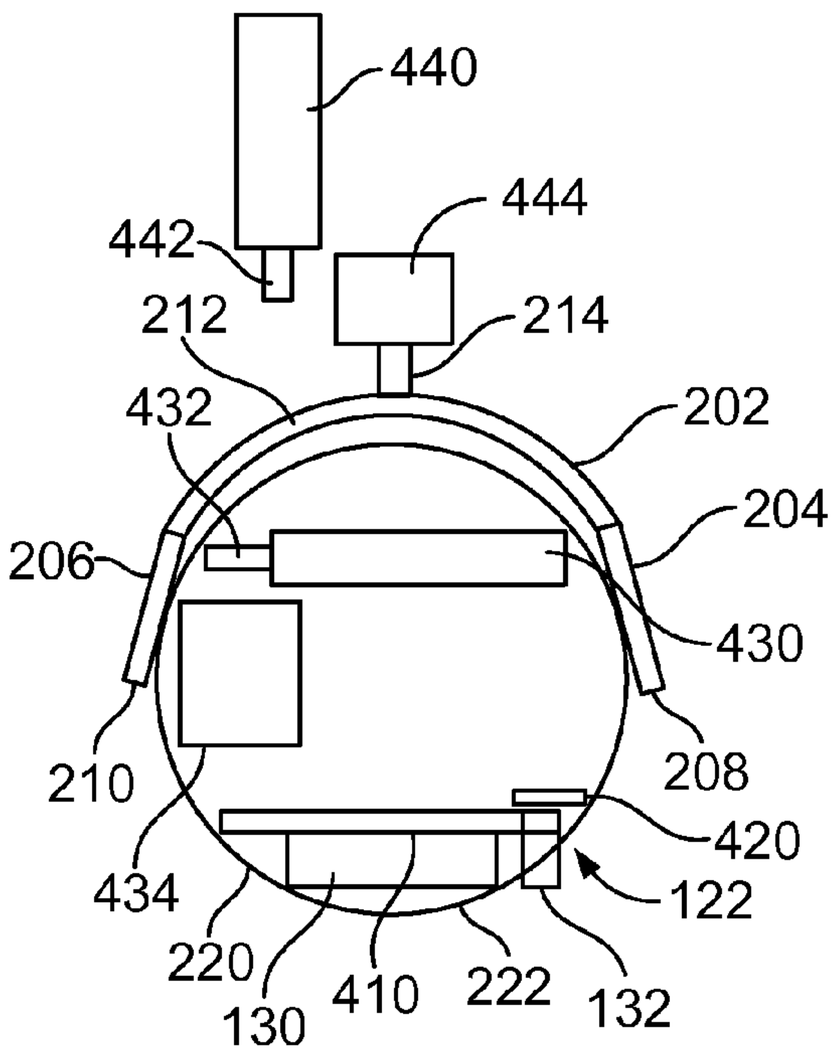


FIG. 4B

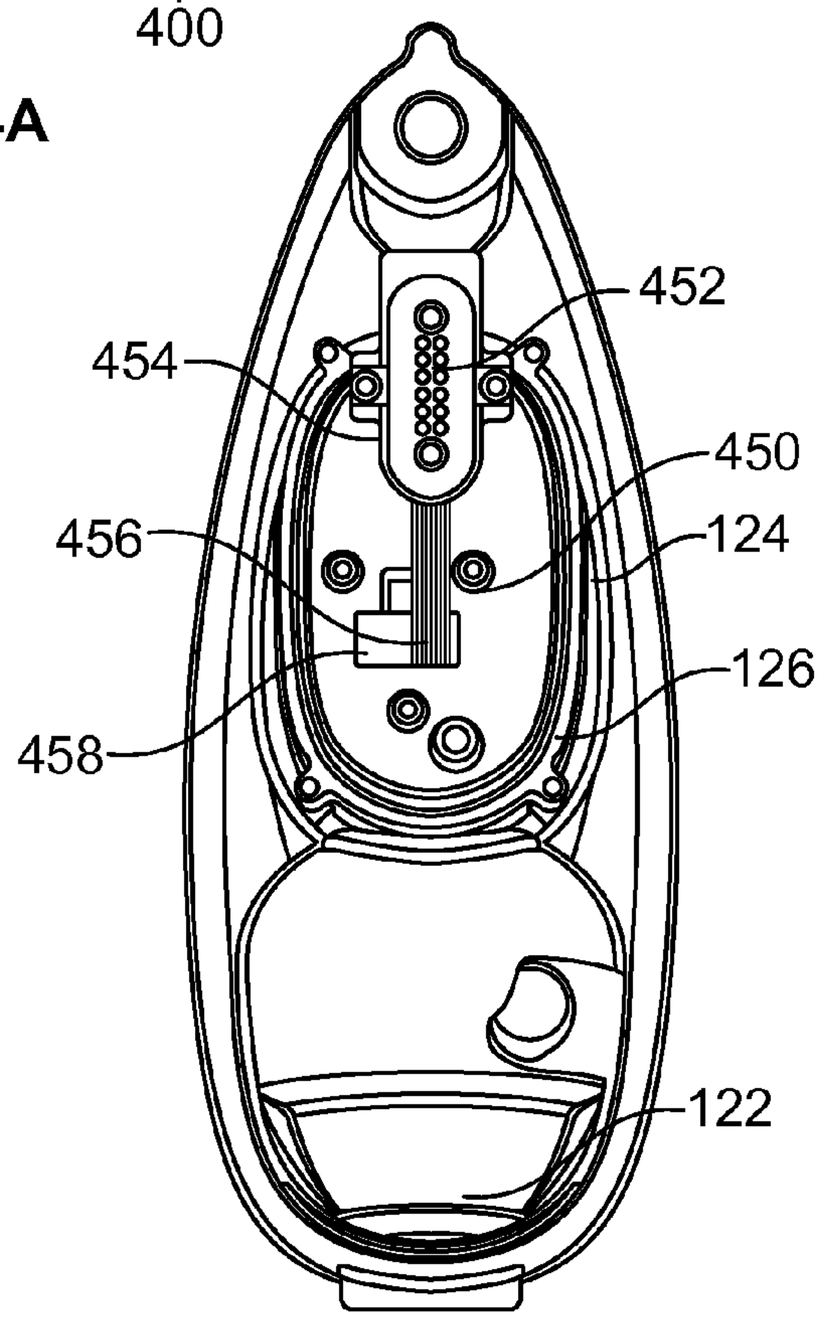


FIG. 4C

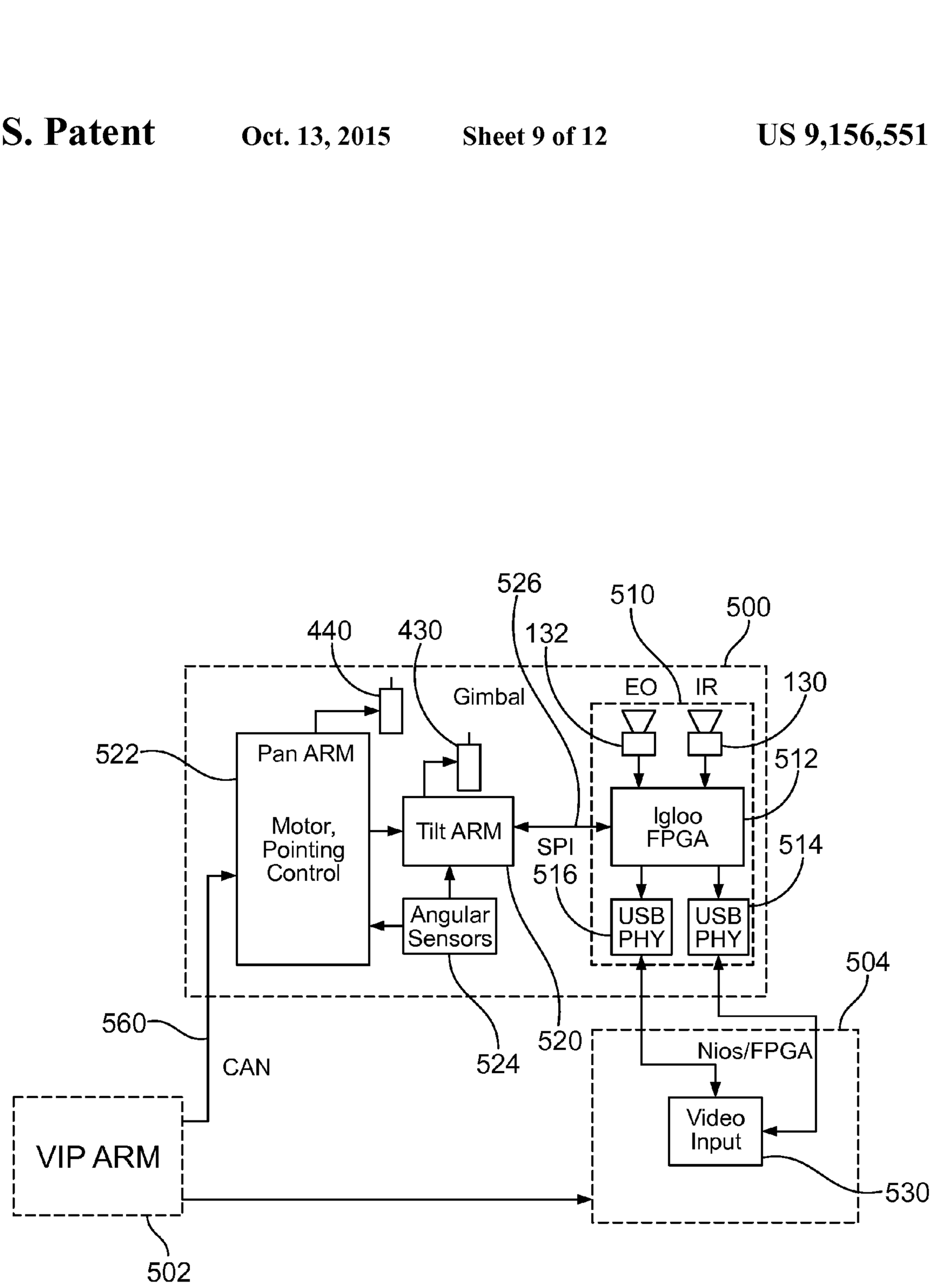

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430
132
Gimbal
EO
IR
130
522
Pan ARM
512
Motor, Pointing Control
Tilt ARM
SPI
Igloo FPGA
514
516
Angular Sensors
USB PHY
USB PHY
504
560
CAN
524
520
Nios/FPGA
VIP ARM
Video Input
530
502

FIG. 5

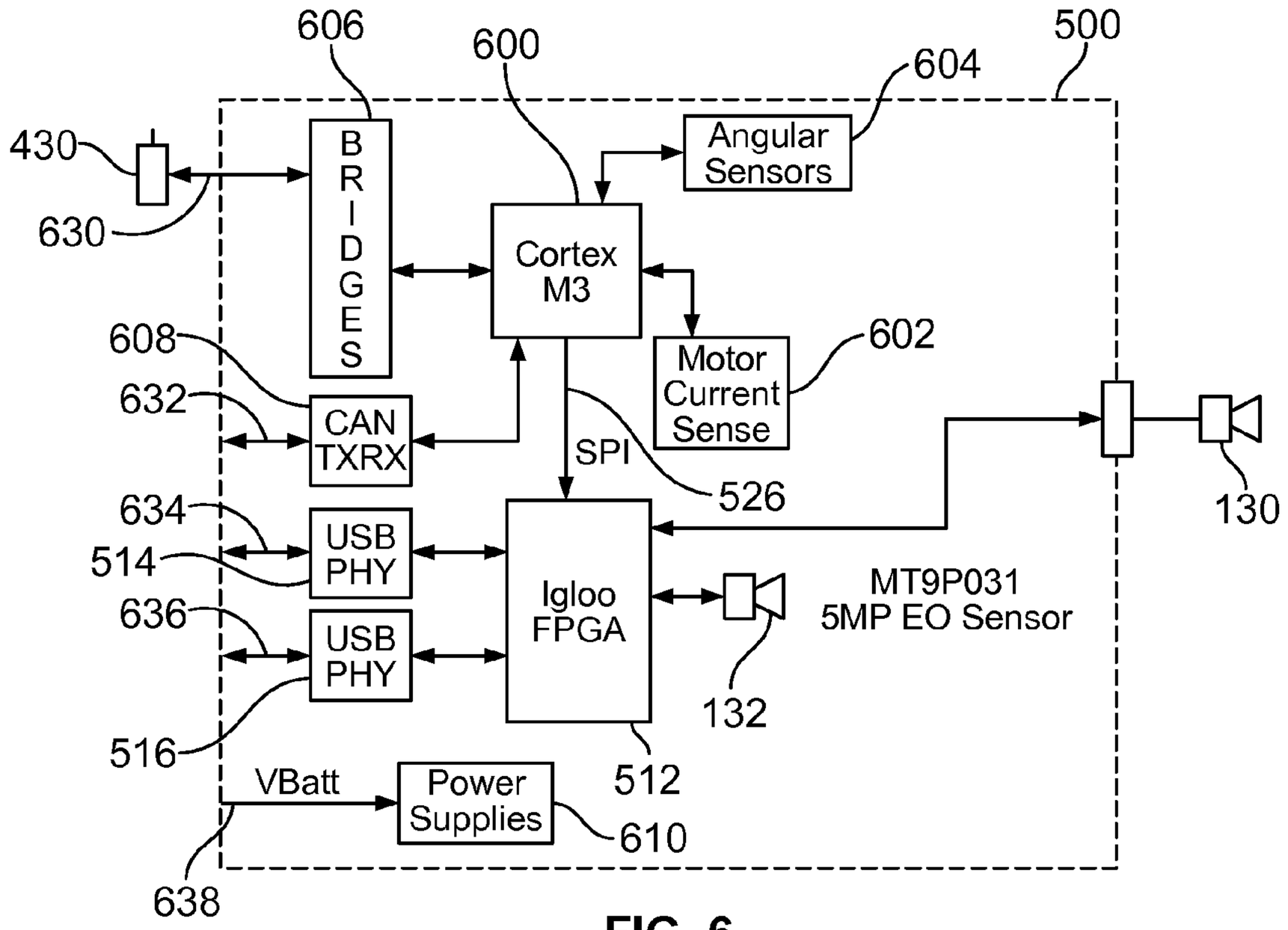

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CAN TXRX
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FIG. 6

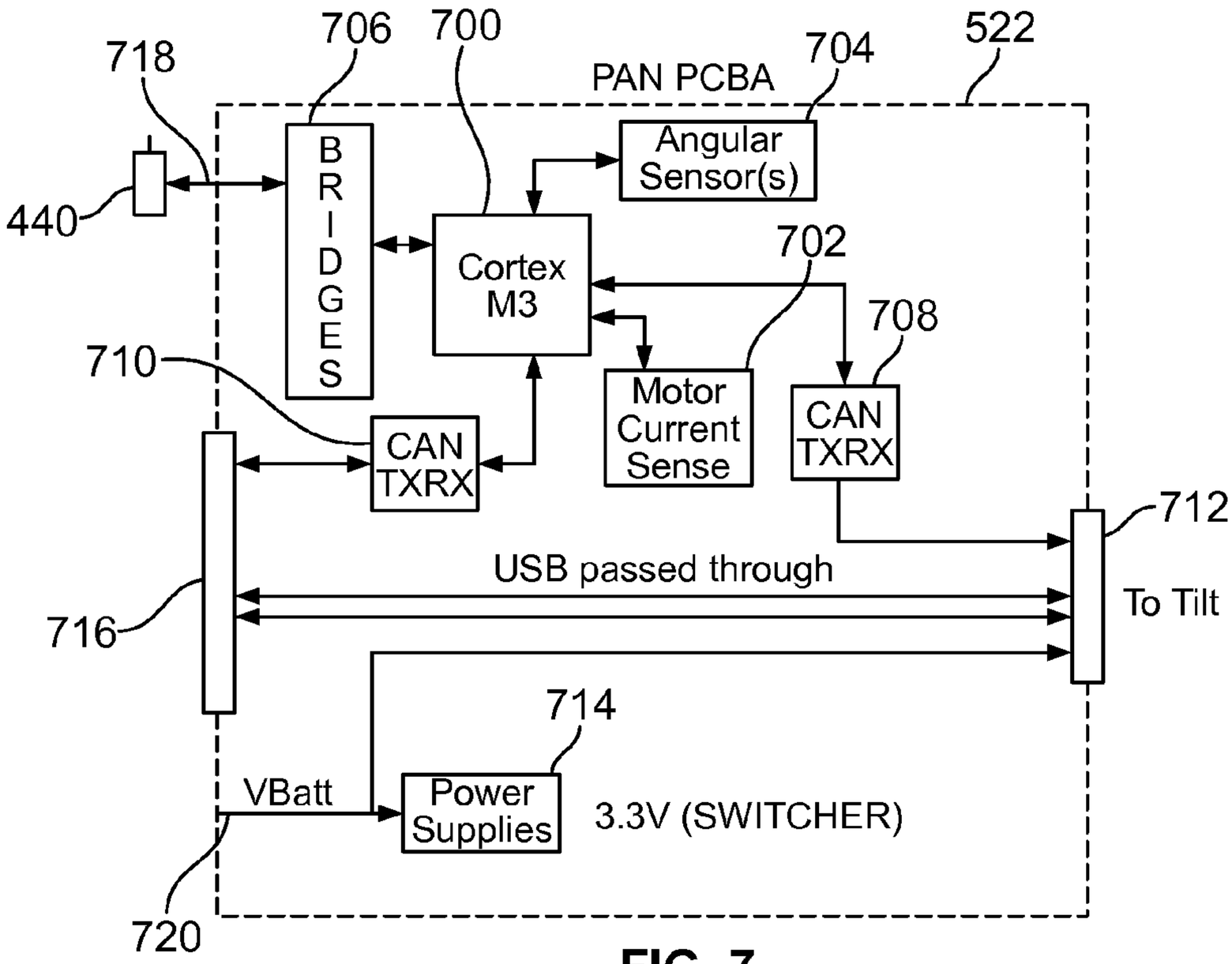

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522
PAN PCBA
440
BRIDGES
Angular Sensor(s)
Cortex M3
702
708
710
CAN TXRX
Motor Current Sense
CAN TXRX
712
USB passed through
To Tilt
716
714
VBatt
Power Supplies
3.3V (SWITCHER)
720

FIG. 7

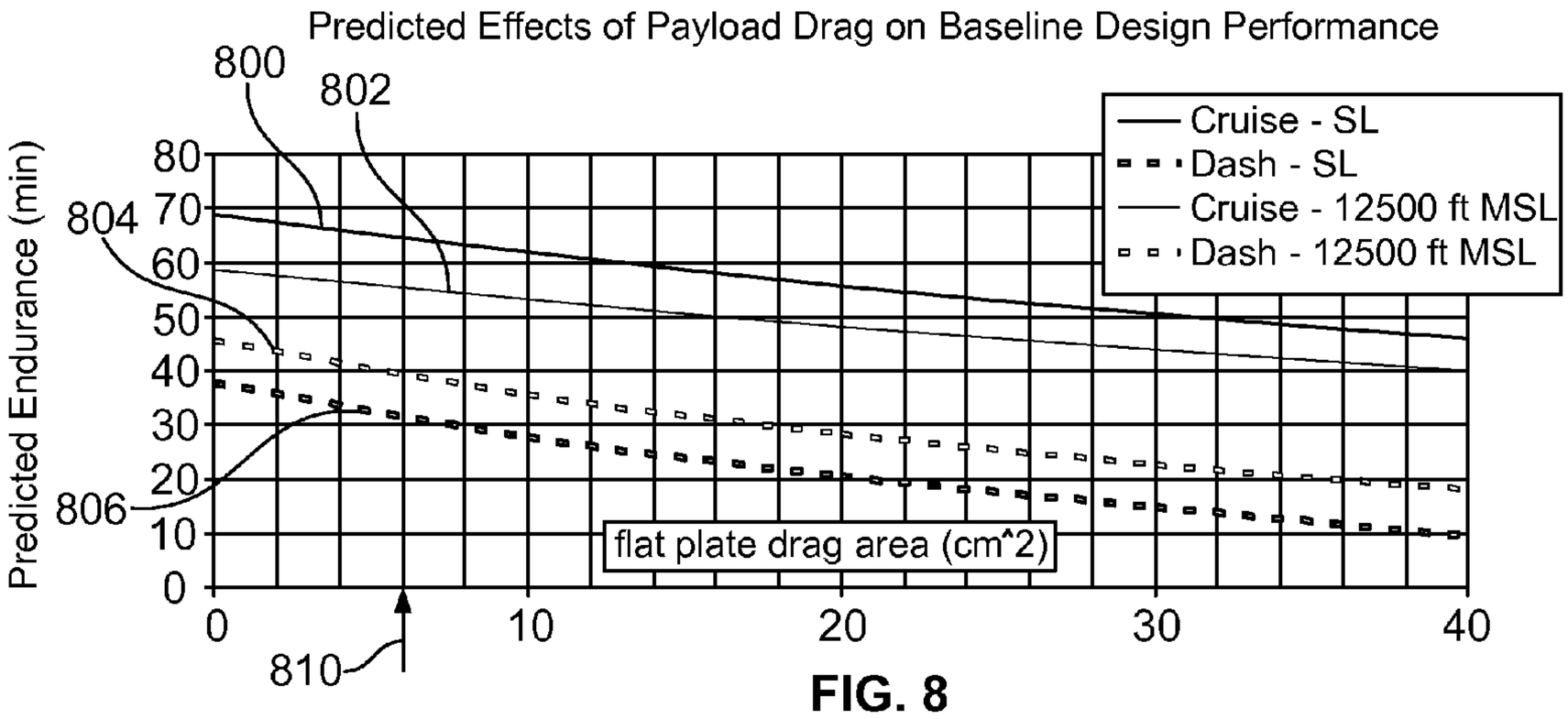

Predicted Effects of Payload Drag on Baseline Design Performance
800
802
804
806
810
Predicted Endurance (min)
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
0
10
20
30
40
flat plate drag area (cm^2)
Cruise - SL
Dash - SL
Cruise - 12500 ft MSL
Dash - 12500 ft MSL

FIG. 8

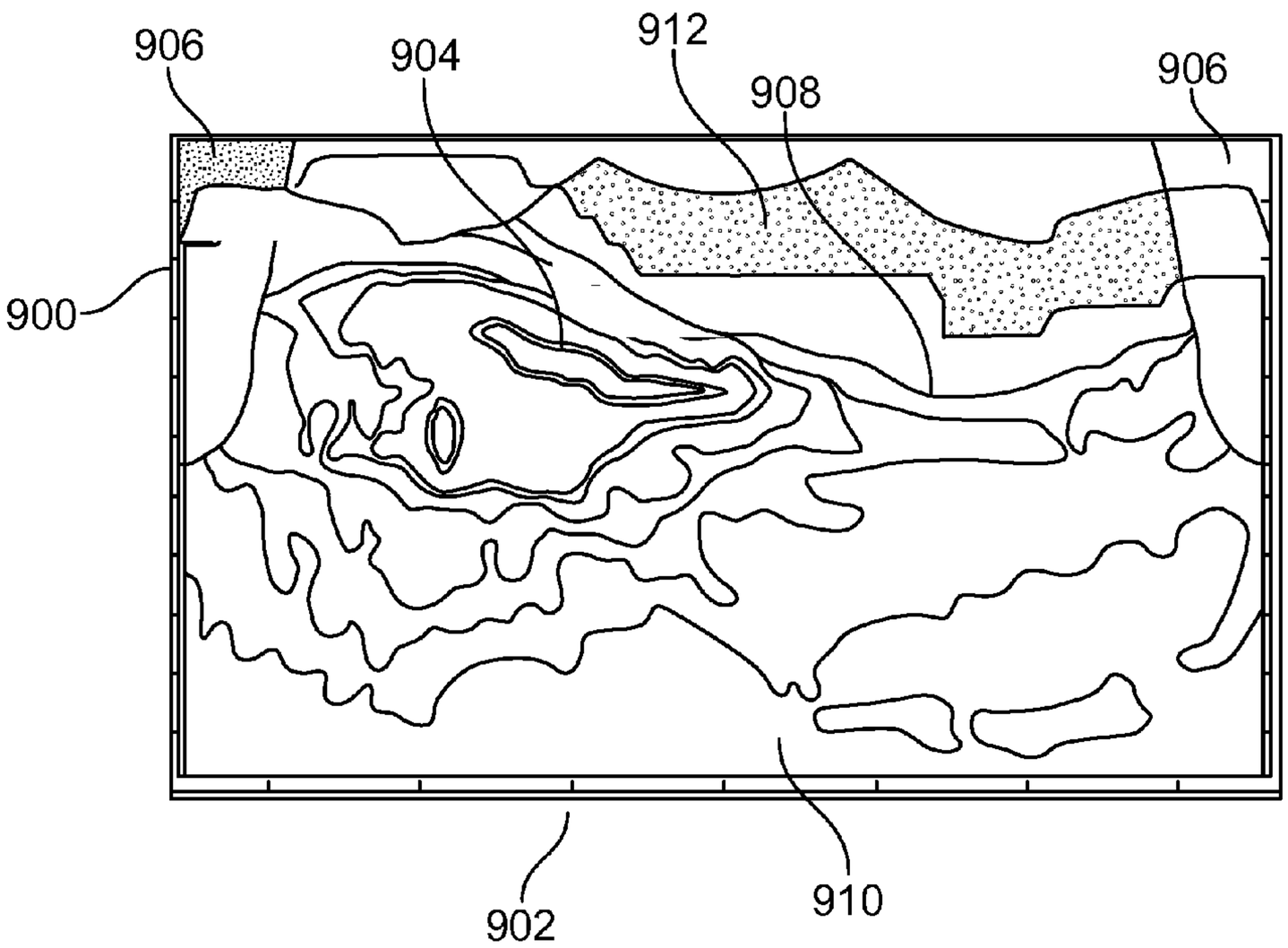

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FIG. 9

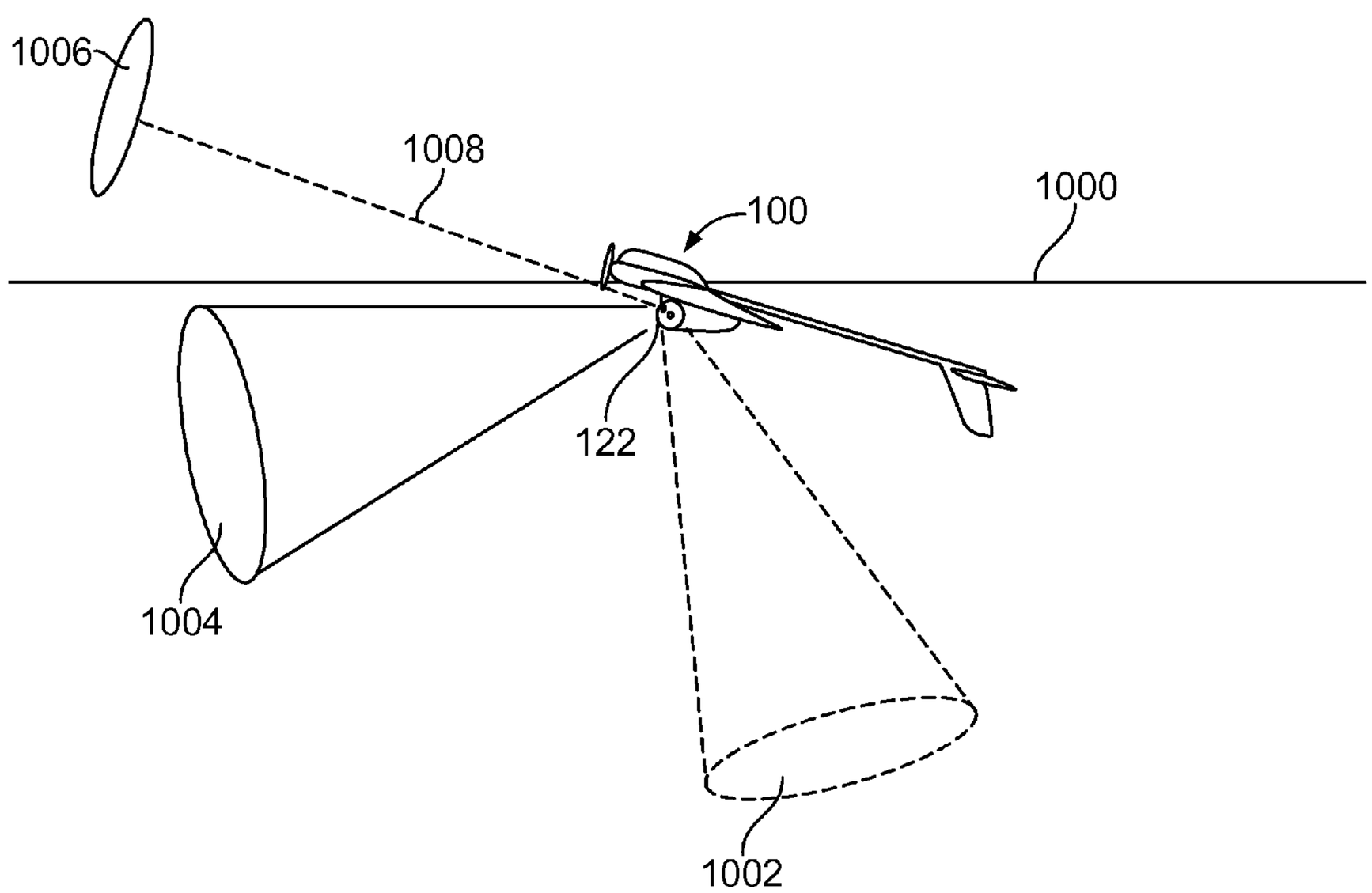


FIG. 10

TILT-BALL TURRET WITH GIMBAL LOCK AVOIDANCE

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present disclosure relates generally to a moveable ball turret for surveillance aircraft and more specifically to a ball turret having tilt and roll actuation with gimbal lock avoidance.

BACKGROUND

The way that the Vietnam War is now remembered as the helicopter war, the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan may be remembered for the use of unmanned aerial surveillance (UAV) craft or drones. Drones may facilitate remote intelligence gathering, alleviating the need for foot soldiers to enter into hostile areas "blind," with little or no information about the location and strength of hostile forces. Drones may provide close combat support, such as identifying and eliminating targets of interest, alleviating the need to expose soldiers and/or airmen to potential small arms fire, mortars, rocket grenades, road-side bombs, anti-aircraft weaponry, missiles, and other dangers.

Although many presently used drones are the roughly the same scale size as piloted aircraft, such aircraft are both relatively expensive and may be detected due to their size. Recently, smaller drones have been developed that may be deployed in greater numbers and are relatively less expensive resulting in greater use by individual units in the field. Smaller drones have certain tradeoffs as they cannot carry the amount of payload of a larger drone. Further, power for such smaller drones is limited due to the size of the aircraft and therefore operating periods are also limited.

Unmanned drone aircraft typically mount a camera in a ball turret assembly which allows movement in three dimensions to allow the camera to track objects on the ground without altering the flight path of the aircraft. Data such as image data may be captured via a sensor such as a camera and transmitted back to a controller. Known ball turret assemblies use a pan tilt mechanism with a cylindrical or spherical turret to mount a sensor such as a camera. Such devices are suspended from the bottom of the aircraft via a fork shaped yoke that may be rotated around a roll axis via a roll actuator. The tilt motion of such a turret starts from zero degrees pointing the camera straight down to a 90 degree positive or negative tilt pointing the camera in the direction of the flight of the aircraft. Thus, such arrangements traditionally have a roll axis that is vertical and a tilt axis is 90 degrees offset from the roll axis.

Current turret designs require gimbals and mounting structures that present a relatively large cross-profile. Thus, drag based on the turret mounting for known turret designs is a consideration especially when drag decreases fuel efficiency and decreases operational range. Such increased drag is a significant factor in limiting the range of smaller drones that have limited power supplies. Further, for certain important viewing areas such as the area directly below the aircraft, the gimbal is locked and therefore panning to the right or left is more difficult to access using the traditional actuators because the tilt simply rotates the turret toward the front or rear of the aircraft. Thus panning right or left requires rotating the turret on the roll axis and then tilting the turret. As with all components, fewer moving parts are desirable and this is especially true with smaller drones where the efficiency of the payload needs to be maximized. Ideally, the portion of the coverage affected by gimbal lock should be an area that is less important or not important at all. As explained above, current gimbal designs put gimbal lock either directly below the aircraft, or point them directly forward and therefore gimbal lock effects relatively important viewing areas.

A further issue is the wiring needed to power and draw data from sensors such as cameras in the ball turret. In known ball turret assemblies, such wiring inhibits the full range of movement of the camera on the ball turret resulting in limited vision. For example, if the turret is rotated to view the area directly below the aircraft, the movement is constrained by the electrical wiring which does not allow the ball to be rotated fully. Since it is desirable for the turret to be rotated fully, conventional mountings substitute a brush interface (a slip ring) for physical wiring which limits the bandwidth thereby limiting data transmission.

Thus, it would be desirable to have a ball turret mounting system to minimize cross-section and thereby minimize drag. It would also be desirable to have a mounting system for a ball turret that allows efficient actuators for maximum coverage for cameras in the ball turret. Also, it would be desirable to provide a physical wired connection to provide greater data bandwidth.

SUMMARY

According to one example a turret assembly for attachment on the undersurface of an aircraft is disclosed. The assembly includes a roll actuator including a drive shaft. A yoke having a cross member is coupled to the drive shaft and a pair of prongs. The yoke is rotated via the roll actuator and drive shaft along a roll axis oriented substantially parallel to the body of the aircraft. A turret is mounted on the prongs of the yoke. A tilt actuator is located within the turret. The tilt actuator tilts the turret on a tilt axis relative to the yoke. The tilt axis is perpendicular to the roll axis.

Another example is an aircraft having a fuselage having an undersurface. A control system accepts positioning commands from a ground station. A data control system sends data to the ground station. A roll actuator includes a drive shaft. A yoke has a cross member coupled to the drive shaft and a pair of prongs. The yoke is rotated via the roll actuator and drive shaft along a roll axis oriented substantially parallel to the body of the aircraft. A turret is mounted on the prongs of the yoke. A tilt actuator is located within the turret. The tilt actuator tilts the turret on a tilt axis relative to the yoke. The tilt axis is perpendicular to the roll axis.

Another example is a method of positioning a turret mounted on the prongs of a yoke having a cross member coupled to a drive shaft and a pair of prongs on the undersurface of an aircraft. The turret is rotated via a roll actuator coupled to the drive shaft along a roll axis oriented substantially parallel to the body of the aircraft. The turret is tilted via a tilt actuator within the turret on a tilt axis relative to the yoke, the tilt axis being perpendicular to the roll axis.

The above summary of the present invention is not intended to represent each embodiment or every aspect of the present invention. The detailed description and Figures will describe many of the embodiments and aspects of the present invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing and other advantages of the invention will become apparent upon reading the following detailed description and upon reference to the drawings.

FIGS. **1**A and **1**B is a perspective view of an unmanned surveillance aircraft having an example ball turret assembly;

FIG. **2**A is close up perspective view of the example ball turret assembly mounted on the aircraft of FIG. **1**;

FIG. **2**B is a bottom view of the example ball turret assembly in FIG. **2**A;

FIG. **2**C is a side view of the example ball turret assembly in FIG. **2**A;

FIG. **2**D is a front view of the example ball turret assembly in FIG. **2**A;

FIG. **2**E is a rear view of the example ball turret assembly in FIG. **2**A;

FIGS. **3**A-**3**L are side and front views of the example ball turret in various tilt and roll positions;

FIG. **4**A is a cross-section view of the example ball turret of FIG. **2**A and related components;

FIG. **4**B is a cross-section top view of the example ball turret of FIG. **2**A taken along the line **4**B-**4**B' in FIG. **4**A;

FIG. **4**C is a cross-section top view of the example ball turret assembly of FIG. **2**A;

FIG. **5** is a block diagram of the electronic and mechanical control systems and data acquisition systems in the ball turret assembly in FIG. **2**;

FIG. **6** is a block diagram of the tilt control system and the data acquisition control system in the ball turret in FIG. **2**;

FIG. **7** is a block diagram of the pan or roll control system in the ball turret mounting in FIG. **2**;

FIG. **8** is a diagram showing the drag parameters of the design of the ball turret in FIG. **1**;

FIG. **9** is a coded diagram of the most frequent used viewing areas for roll and tilt actuation of the ball turret in FIG. **1**; and

FIG. **10** is a view of the example aircraft in FIGS. **1**A-**1**B in flight with the areas of gimbal lock of the ball turret.

While the invention is susceptible to various modifications and alternative forms, specific embodiments have been shown by way of example in the drawings and will be described in detail herein. It should be understood, however, that the invention is not intended to be limited to the particular forms disclosed. Rather, the invention is to cover all modifications, equivalents, and alternatives falling within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIGS. **1**A and **1**B are perspective views of an unmanned reconnaissance aircraft **100**. The aircraft **100** has a fuselage **102** mounting a left wing **104** and a right wing **106**. The aircraft **100** is powered by an engine **108** which rotates a propeller **110**. The aircraft **100** is stabilized with the assistance of elevators **114** and a tail **116** mounted on a boom **112**. In this example, the aircraft **100** is small enough to be carried by an individual soldier and has a top speed of about 55 knots and a cruising speed of about 25 knots. Of course, the principles described herein may be applied to larger or smaller aircraft that are faster or slower than the example aircraft **100** in FIG. **1**.

The aircraft **100** includes a ball turret assembly **118** that is suspended from an under surface **120** of the fuselage **102**. The ball turret assembly **118** includes a ball turret **122** that is mounted in a housing **124** on the under surface **120**. The ball turret **122** is mounted in front of a fairing **126** that is also part of the housing **124**. In this example, the ball turret **122** holds an infrared camera **130** and a color camera **132**. In this example, the infrared camera **130** may be a MicroTau **320** or **640** model camera available from FLIR and the color camera is a 5 megapixel Model MT9P031 EO sensor. Both cameras are configured for taking approximately 30 frames per second video stream of images but may also send still images at higher resolution. Of course other types of cameras and/or sensors may be mounted in the ball turret **122**. The ball turret **122** is rotated by a yoke which is mounted on the fairing **126**. As will be explained below, the fairing **126** in combination with the ball turret assembly **118** reduces drag because the yoke is behind the ball turret **122**. By actuators for tilting and rolling the ball turret **122**, the cameras **130** and **132** may be directed toward areas under the under surface **120** of the fuselage **102**. As shown in FIG. **1**A, the ball turret has been rotated to point the cameras **130** and **132** to the left side of the aircraft **100**. FIG. **1**A shows an approximate imaging area that may be viewed by the cameras **130** and **132** in this position. FIG. **1**B shows the ball turret **122** rotated to position the cameras **130** and **132** to view an area to the front of the aircraft **100**.

FIGS. **2**A-**2**E are close up views of the example ball turret assembly **118** in FIG. **1**. FIG. **2**A is close up perspective view of the example ball turret assembly **118**, FIG. **2**B is a bottom view of the example ball turret assembly **118**, FIG. **2**C is a side view of the example ball turret assembly **118**, FIG. **2**D is a front view of the example ball turret assembly **118** and FIG. **2**E is a rear view of the example ball turret assembly **118**. The ball turret assembly **118** includes the ball turret **122** mounted on the fairing **126** on the under surface **120** of FIG. **1** via a gimbal assembly **200**. A yoke **202** extends from the fairing **126**. The yoke **202** includes a pair of prongs **204** and **206** that hold the ball turret **122** via pins **208** and **210**. The prongs **204** and **206** have respective opposite ends from the pins **208** and **210** connected by a cross bar **212**. The cross bar **212** is attached to a roll drive shaft **214** that supports the yoke **202** from the fairing **126**. The ball turret **122** includes an exterior surface **220** that is water proof and sealed to protect the mechanical and electrical components such as the cameras **130** and **132** stored therein. Since the yoke **202** does not have any actuating or electronic components the number of parts requiring water-proofing is also decreased. The exterior surface **220** has an aperture **222** for the infrared camera **130** and a mounting cylinder **224** for the color camera **132**.

A roll axis is represented by a dashed line **240** which points forward relative to the aircraft **100**. As will be explained the ball turret **122** may be rotated around the roll axis **240** via the roll drive shaft **214** being rotated by a roll actuator in the fairing **126**. A tilt axis represented by a dashed line **250** is 90 degrees offset from the roll axis **240**. The ball turret **122** is therefore rotated on the prongs **204** and **206** around the tilt axis **250** via a tilt actuator contained in the turret **122**. A wiring harness **260** containing wiring for power, data and communications extends from the fairing **126** to the ball turret **122** through the interior of the drive shaft **214** and is attached to the yoke **202** and follows the prong **204** to the interior of the ball turret **122**.

FIG. **3**A-**3**L are side and front views of the example ball turret **122** in various degrees of tilt and roll to position the infrared camera **130** and the color camera **132** relative to the fairing **126** on the under surface **120** of the aircraft **100** in FIG. **1**. FIG. **3**A is a side view and FIG. **3**B is a front view of the ball turret **122** at zero degrees tilt on the tilt axis **250** and zero degrees roll on the roll axis **240**. As shown in FIGS. **3**A-**3**B, the infra-red camera **130** is pointed directly down to the ground. The yoke **202** is positioned via the actuating the drive shaft **214** via a tilt actuator in the fairing **126** to rotate the prongs **204** and **206** relative to the roll axis **240**. The ball turret **122** is rotated at zero degrees relative to the tilt axis **250** by the tilt actuator within the ball turret **122**. In order to view areas to the immediate right or left of the ball turret **122**, the yoke **202** is rotated via the drive shaft **214** thus avoiding gimbal lock.

FIG. **3**C is a side view and FIG. **3**D is a front view of the ball turret **122** at approximately plus seventy degrees tilt and zero degrees roll. In FIGS. **3**C and **3**D, the ball turret **122** has been actuated around the tilt axis **250** from the positions shown in FIGS. **3**A and **3**B via the tilt actuator. The rotation around the roll axis **240** remains the same and therefore the cameras **130** and **132** are pointing ahead of the aircraft **100** at a down twenty degree angle from the horizontal plane.

FIG. **3**E is a side view and FIG. **3**F is a front view of the ball turret **122** at approximately negative seventy degrees tilt and zero degrees roll. In FIGS. **3**E and **3**F, the ball turret **122** has been actuated around the tilt axis **250** from the positions shown in FIGS. **3**A and **3**B via the tilt actuator. The rotation around the roll axis **240** remains the same and therefore the cameras **130** and **132** are pointing behind the aircraft **100** at a down twenty degree angle from the horizontal plane.

FIG. **3**G is a side view and FIG. **3**H is a front view of the ball turret **122** at zero degrees tilt and positive ninety degrees roll. In FIGS. **3**G and **3**H, the ball turret **122** has been actuated around the roll axis **240** from the positions shown in FIGS. **3**A and **3**B by rotating the drive shaft **214** and thereby the yoke **202**. The rotation around the tilt axis **250** remains the same and therefore the cameras **130** and **132** are pointing to the left side of the aircraft **100**.

FIG. **3**I is a side view and FIG. **3**J is a front view of the ball turret **122** at zero degrees tilt and negative ninety degrees roll. In FIGS. **3**I and **3**J, the ball turret **122** has been actuated around the roll axis **240** from the positions shown in FIGS. **3**A and **3**B by rotating the drive shaft **214** and thereby the yoke **202**. The rotation around the tilt axis **250** remains the same and therefore the cameras **130** and **132** are pointing to the right side of the aircraft **100**.

FIG. **3**K is a side view and FIG. **3**L is a front view of the ball turret **122** at positive twenty degrees tilt and positive one hundred ten degrees roll. In FIGS. **3**K and **3**L, the ball turret **122** has been actuated around the roll axis **240** from the positions shown in FIGS. **3**A and **3**B via rotating the drive shaft **214**. The rotation around the tilt axis **250** is at about twenty degrees by rotating the ball turret **122** relative to the yoke **202**. The cameras **130** and **132** are therefore pointing to the left front side of the aircraft **100** at an angle above the plane of the flight path of the aircraft **100**.

FIGS. **4**A and **4**B are cross-section views of the example ball turret **122** and the related ball turret assembly **118** of FIG. **2**. As shown in FIGS. **4**A-**4**B, an interior surface **400** of the ball turret **122** encloses various mechanical and electrical components. The infrared camera **130** is mounted on a circuit board **410** while the color camera **132** is mounted on a circuit board **420**. The circuit boards **410** and **420** are fixed on the interior surface **400** in order to orient the infrared camera **130** through the aperture **222** and the color camera **132** through the mounting cylinder **224**. The tilt actuator includes a tilt motor **430** that rotates a drive shaft **432**. The drive shaft **432** drives the gears in a gear box **434**. The gear box **434** down shifts the rotations from the motor **430** to rotate a drive shaft **436** that is mounted on the pin **208** rotatably coupled to the prong **204** of the yoke **202**. The other prong **206** of the yoke **202** is rotatably mounted on the pin **210** on the exterior of the ball turret **122**.

The yoke **202** is mounted on the drive shaft **214** which is connected to the fairing **126**. The fairing **126** encloses the actuators for the roll or pan motion. The roll actuator thus drives the drive shaft **214** and the yoke **202**. The fairing **126** encloses a pan or roll motor **440** which rotates a drive shaft **442** which drives a gear box **444**. The gear box **444** in turn drives the drive shaft **214** to rotate the yoke **202**. FIG. **4**C is a top view of the housing **124** which includes the fairing **126** and the ball turret **122**. The fairing **126** encloses a circuit board **450** that holds the electronics for controlling the tilt and roll actuators. A vertical tab **452** includes an electronic connector **454** which provides connections to electronic components contained in the fuselage **102**. A set of cables **456** extend from the connector **454** through an aperture **458** to provide control and data signals to and from the electronic components in the fairing **126** and the ball turret **122**.

As shown in FIG. **2**B, the wiring harness **260** containing wiring for power, data and communications extends from the fairing **126** to the ball turret **122** through a slip ring assembly and the interior of the drive shaft **214**. As shown in FIGS. **2**B and **2**C, the wiring harness **260** is attached to the yoke **202** and follows the prong **204** to the interior of the ball turret **122**. The controls for the roll and tilt actuators prevent the ball turret **122** from rotating the yoke **202** to tangle the wiring harness **260**. Since the data connections are hardwired from sensors such as the cameras **130** and **132**, maximum bandwidth may be achieved from image data acquired by the cameras **130** and **132**.

This arrangement allows the cameras **130** and **132** in the turret **122** maximum view of the area of interest and reduces the drag of the turret assembly **118**. As explained above, the pan or roll mechanics (actuators) driving the yoke **202** are located behind the ball turret **122** in the fairing **126**. Since the actuators for the roll motion are mounted in the fairing **126** and movement occurs only in the roll actuator in the fairing **126** to rotate the yoke **202** holding the ball turret **122**, the yoke **202** has no moving parts or electronic components. This allows the ball turret **122** and fairing **126** alone to be water proofed to protect the electronic and mechanical components of the ball turret assembly **118** contained in the ball turret **122**.

FIG. **5** is a block diagram of the electronic and mechanical control systems and data acquisition systems in the ball turret assembly **118** and fuselage **102** of the aircraft **100** in FIG. **1**. Identical elements are labeled with identical reference numbers as in FIGS. **1**-**4**. The control systems include a ball turret control system **500**, an air vehicle control system **502** and a data processing system **504**. As will be explained the control system **502** and data processing system **504** are stored entirely within the fuselage **102** of the aircraft **100** in this example.

The ball turret control system **500** includes mechanical actuators to roll and tilt the ball turret **122** relative to the aircraft **100** as well as an electronics module **510** to manage the data output from the cameras **130** and **132**. The electronics module **510** is contained within the ball turret **122** and includes the cameras **130** and **132** that are coupled to a video controller **512**. The cameras **130** and **132** output raw image data to a video controller **512**. The video controller **512** in this example is a field programmable gate array (FPGA) configured to process the parallel raw image data from the cameras **130** and **132**. The FPGA is configured to accept the parallel data from the cameras **130** and **132** and serialize it for the video output. The outputs of the video controller **512** are sent to two USB ports **514** and **516**. Of course the data may be routed using other output interfaces. The USB ports **514** and **516** are coupled to the data processing system **504** in the fuselage **102** of the aircraft **100**.

The ball turret control system **500** includes a tilt control module **520** that controls the tilt motor **430** and a pan or roll control module **522** that controls the roll motor **440**. As explained above, the tilt control module **520** is contained in the turret **122** while the pan or roll control module **522** and roll motor **440** are contained in the fairing **126** in FIG. **2**A. The tilt control module **520** and the roll control module **522** are coupled to a set of angular sensors **524** that sense the position

of the turret **122**. In this example, the angular sensors **524** are magnetic sensors that track magnets on the yoke **202** to sense the tilt angular position, and another magnet on the roll drive shaft to sense the roll angular position. A Serial Peripheral Interface (SPI) coupler **526** connects the video controller **512** with the tilt control module **520** to provide data on video display for purpose of orientating an image such as for compensating for rotation and zoom.

The video data processing system **504** receives serial video data from the USB ports **514** and **516** via a video input controller **530**. The serial video data includes information on how to display each image frame such as rotation and scale. The video data processing system **504** may include an FPGA to convert the raw video data to a data feed to a ground station. The video data processing system **504** may perform stab/tracker according to settings stored by the controller **530**. The video input controller **530** thus receives the input serial video data from the USB ports **514** and **516** and stabilizes the video frame by frame. The video input controller **530** also offsets the video display and smoothes the images from frame to frame to filter out rapid movement. The video data processing system **504** may also perform automatic gain control measurements on the video data and return the results to the ground station.

The ball turret control system **500** also includes the air vehicle control system **502** which sends control signals via a controller area network (CAN) connector **560** to the tilt control module **520** and the roll control module **522** to position the ball turret **122** relative to the aircraft **100**. The air vehicle control system **502** receives commands from a remote ground controller (not shown). The ground controller may send commands to position the ball turret **122** via a control device such as a joystick. The air vehicle control system **502** forwards the received commands to the tilt control module **520** and the roll control module **522** to rotate the ball turret **122** to the desired position via the tilt and roll motors **430** and **440**. The air vehicle control system **502** also provides sensor and state estimates based on position and speed sensors on the aircraft **100**. The position of the aircraft is passed from the air vehicle control system **502** to the control system **500** via the CAN connector **560** as input data for an algorithm to stabilize and orient the turret **122** to maintain lock on a ground target and therefore compensate for movement of the aircraft **100**. The algorithm runs on a processor **700** in the roll control module **522** as will be explained below. The algorithm converts the aircraft state data such as the aircraft state estimate and body rates into a state estimate internally and then passes commands based on the data to the motor controller software running on cortex processors **600** and **700** (shown in FIGS. **6** and **7**) of the respective tilt control module **520** and the roll control module **522** to adjust the tilt and roll of the ball turret **122**. The air vehicle control system **502** also provides mission data such as way points, the flight mode, joystick commands, and camera control data to the turret control system **500** via the CAN connector **560**. The air vehicle control system **502** also interfaces with the video data processing system **504** by sending camera select commands and camera control data for an integrated image.

FIG. **6** is a block diagram of the ball turret control system **500** which includes various circuit boards and electronic components contained in the ball turret **122** in FIG. **2**. As explained above, the tilt control module **520** contains inputs and outputs to the infrared camera **130** and the color camera **132**. The tilt control module **520** is also coupled to the tilt motor **430**.

The control system **500** includes a cortex processor **600**, a tilt motor current sensor **602**, a tilt angular sensor **604**, a bridge **606**, a CAN receiver/transmitter **608** and a power regulator **610**. The cortex processor **600** controls the motor **430** via the bridge **606** in response to commands received on the CAN receiver/transmitter **608**. The cortex processor **600** obtains motor rotation data from the motor sensor **602** and the angular sensor **604** and sends the data to the CAN receiver/transmitter **608**. The angular sensor **604** is an angular or proximate Hall effect sensor in this example that senses the magnetic field of a magnet on yoke **202** to determine the angular position of the ball turret **122**. A series of connectors including a motor control connector **630**, a CAN connector **632**, a pair of USB connectors **634** and **636** and a power connector **638** are bundled in the wiring harness **260** to connect the control system **500** to the components in the fairing **126**.

The power regulator **610** receives power from the power connector **638** which is coupled to a power supply such as batteries carried by the aircraft **100**. The power regulator **610** provides power to the electrical components at different voltages specific to the electronic component.

FIG. **7** is a block diagram of the roll control system **522** in the ball turret assembly **118** in FIG. **2**. The roll control system **522** includes a cortex processor **700**, a roll motor current sensor **702**, a roll angular sensor **704**, a bridge **706**, a CAN receiver/transmitter **708**, a second CAN receiver transmitter **710**, a tilt system interface **712**, a power regulator **714**, and a control system interface **716**. The cortex processor **700** controls the roll or pan motor **440** with motor control input **718** to the bridge **706** in response to commands received on the CAN receiver/transmitter **710**. The cortex processor **700** relays tilt commands via the CAN receiver/transmitter **708** via the tilt interface **712** to the tilt control module **520**. The cortex processor **700** obtains motor rotation data from the motor sensor **702** and the angular sensor **704** and sends the data to the CAN receiver/transmitter **708** which sends the data to the air vehicle control system **502** in FIG. **5**. The angular sensor **704** is an angular or proximate Hall effect sensor in this example that senses the magnetic field of a magnet mounted on the yoke **202** to determine the roll angular position of the ball turret **122**.

The power regulator **714** receives power from a power input **720** which is coupled to a power supply such as batteries carried by the aircraft **100**. The power regulator **714** provides power to the electrical components at different voltages specific to the electronic component.

With the present configuration of the ball turret **122**, solid wire connections may be used such as the wiring harness **260** between the roll actuator controls and the electronic controls in the ball turret **122** since the turret **122** is mounted in front of the fairing **126** thereby eliminating a slip ring or brush configuration. Because of this mounting and the natural constraints of the body of the aircraft **100**, the pan and tilt movements do not twist the wiring harness when the cameras **130** and **132** are pointed down to the ground and moved to the left or right. Such a configuration also avoids gimbal lock when positioning the cameras **130** and **132** straight below the aircraft for applications such as mapping. The fairing **126** in conjunction with the housing **124** surround the ball turret **122** and function as smooth surfaces with reduced cross section to reduce drag.

FIG. **8** is a series of drag profiles at different speeds of the aircraft **100** with various cross-sections measured in drag area. The horizontal axis represents the drag area of the ball turret assembly **118** while the vertical axis represents the endurance of the aircraft **100**. A solid line **800** represents drag at sea level at cruise speed. A solid line **802** represents drag at an altitude of 12,500 feet at cruise speed. A dashed line **804**

represents drag at maximum air speed at sea level. A dashed line **806** represents drag at maximum air speed at 12,500 feet altitude.

As shown in FIG. **8**, the endurance of the aircraft is affected by the cross section area of the ball turret assembly **118** which creates drag. The larger the cross section area of the ball turret assembly **118**, the shorter the endurance of the aircraft. An arrow **810** represents the cross section area of the mounting of the ball turret assembly **118** in FIGS. **2-4**. As may be shown, the ball turret **122** in conjunction with the fairing **126** reduces the forward profile of the ball turret **122** and decreases drag. As explained above, the pan or roll mechanics (actuators) are contained in the fairing **126** and behind the ball turret **122** thereby reducing the drag from such components.

FIG. **9** is a graphic showing the desired areas of the positioning of the ball turret **122** relative to the cameras **130** and **132**. A vertical axis **900** represents the elevation which is controlled by a combination of the roll and tilt of the ball turret **122**. The elevation is limited by the fuselage **102** of the aircraft **100** and therefore ranges from negative 90 degrees (straight down) to positive 20 degrees. A horizontal axis **902** represents the azimuth which ranges from negative 180 degrees to positive 180 degrees. A set of areas **904** represents the general position of the cameras **130** and **132** for functions such as surveillance and reconnaissance. A set of other areas **906** represents areas that are blocked by the aircraft **100**. A set of areas **908** represent other areas that may be potential positions for the cameras **130** and **132** during a variety of missions. A set of areas **910** represents the general position of the cameras **130** and **132** for functions such as mapping. In previous systems, this is the set of areas most affected by limited performance due to gimbal lock. A final set of areas **912** represents a region of lower or minimal observation interest (namely, an area above the horizon and generally ahead of the air vehicle). Within the areas **912** can lie an area or region (such as area **1006**, described below in FIG. **10**), where the performance of the turret **122** is limited and/or effected by the turret's gimbal lock. As such, this area **912** is not of typical use or importance to any anticipated gimbal operations and functions. That is, by aligning the roll-axis to be directed above the horizon and in front of the aircraft **100** during its typical operations, the region or area of gimbal lock is placed such that it will have minimum to no effect on the typical operation of the ball-turret **122**.

FIG. **10** is a view of the example aircraft **100** in FIGS. **1A-1B** in flight with the areas of gimbal lock of the ball turret **122** such as those shown in the areas **912** of the graphic in FIG. **9**. The aircraft **100** is shown in flight relative to a line **1000** representing the horizon. As shown in FIG. **10**, the aircraft **100** is generally flown at an angle relative to the horizon **1000** (that is, the aircraft while flying may have a positive angle of attack relative to a horizontal, or substantially horizontal, direction of travel). The turret **122** is generally pointed at areas on the ground such as an area **1002** which avoid gimbal lock. The turret **122** may be pointed to an area **1004** that is straight ahead of the flight of the aircraft **1000** and avoid gimbal lock due to the angle of the aircraft **100** relative to the horizon **1000**. As may be seen in FIG. **10**, when pointed at the area **1004**, the ball turret **122** is actually tilted relative to the center axis of aircraft **100**. The ball turret **122** is in gimbal lock in a position **1006** above the horizon **1000** that is aligned with a dashed line **1008** representing the tilt axis of the turret **122**. The area **1006** is above the horizon **1000** and therefore is not generally used (as the vehicle is typically used to view and track ground based objects) thereby avoiding gimbal lock. This positioning of the roll-axis also provides the benefit of allowing a roll-axis control motor or actuator to be positioned in the fairing positioned directly behind the ball-turret **122** (such as the fairing **126** shown in FIGS. **1-4** and referenced herein above).

The various controllers such as the video controller **512** in FIG. **5**, and the cortex processors **600** and **700** in FIGS. **6** and **7** may be conveniently implemented using one or more general purpose computer systems, microprocessors, digital signal processors, micro-controllers, application specific integrated circuits (ASIC), programmable logic devices (PLD), field programmable logic devices (FPLD), field programmable gate arrays (FPGA) and the like, programmed according to the teachings as described and illustrated herein, as will be appreciated by those skilled in the computer, software and networking arts.

While the present invention has been described with reference to one or more particular embodiments, those skilled in the art will recognize that many changes may be made thereto without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention. Each of these embodiments and obvious variations thereof is contemplated as falling within the spirit and scope of the claimed invention, which is set forth in the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A turret assembly for attachment on the undersurface of an aircraft, the assembly comprising:

a roll actuator including a drive shaft;

a yoke having a cross member coupled to the drive shaft and a pair of prongs, the yoke being rotated via the roll actuator and drive shaft along a roll axis oriented substantially parallel to the body of the aircraft;

a turret mounted on the prongs of the yoke;

a tilt actuator within the turret, the tilt actuator tilting the turret on a tilt axis relative to the yoke, the tilt axis being perpendicular to the roll axis;

a fairing containing the roll actuator, the fairing coupled to the undersurface of the aircraft behind the turret; and

a wiring harness for delivery of electrical signals between the turret and the fairing, the wiring harness including one or more wires having a first portion that extends through the drive shaft and a second portion that is mounted exteriorly of a first prong of the yoke, between the first prong and the turret.

2. The turret assembly of claim **1**, wherein the turret has a generally spherical shape.

3. The turret assembly of claim **1**, wherein the turret has an aperture and includes a sensor positioned in the aperture.

4. The turret assembly of claim **3**, wherein the sensor includes at least one of a color camera and an infrared camera.

5. The turret assembly of claim **4**, further comprising a video controller located within the turret, the video controller coupled to the sensor and providing a video output from the sensor.

6. The turret assembly of claim **1**, wherein the tilt actuator includes a processor and a tilt motor and the roll actuator includes a processor and a roll motor, the processors accepting positioning inputs and controlling the respective tilt and roll motors to position the ball turret.

7. An aircraft comprising:

a fuselage having an undersurface;

a control system accepting positioning commands from a ground station;

a data control system for sending data to the ground station;

a roll actuator including a drive shaft;

a yoke having a cross member coupled to the drive shaft and a pair of prongs, the yoke being rotated via the roll actuator and drive shaft along a roll axis oriented substantially parallel to the body of the aircraft;

a turret mounted on the prongs of the yoke;

a tilt actuator within the turret, the tilt actuator tilting the turret on a tilt axis relative to the yoke, the tilt axis being perpendicular to the roll axis;

a fairing containing the roll actuator, the fairing coupled to the undersurface of the aircraft behind the turret; and

a wiring harness for delivery of electrical signals between the turret and the fairing, the wiring harness including one or more wires having a first portion that extends through the drive shaft and a second portion that is mounted exteriorly of a first prong of the yoke, between the first prong and the turret.

8. The aircraft of claim **7**, wherein the turret has a generally spherical shape.

9. The aircraft of claim **7**, wherein the turret has an aperture and includes a sensor positioned in the aperture.

10. The aircraft of claim **9**, wherein the sensor includes at least one of a color camera and an infrared camera.

11. The aircraft of claim **9**, further comprising a video controller located within the turret, the video controller coupled to the sensor and providing a video output from the sensor.

12. The aircraft of claim **7**, wherein the tilt actuator includes a processor and a tilt motor and the roll actuator includes a cortex controller and a roll motor, the processor accepting positioning inputs and controlling the respective tilt and roll motors to position the ball turret.

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