

Applications of optical fiber assemblies in harsh environments: The journey past, present, and future

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ABSTRACT

Over the past ten years, NASA has studied the effects of harsh environments on optical fiber assemblies for communication systems, lidar systems, and science missions. The culmination of this has resulted in recent technologies that are unique and tailored to meeting difficult requirements under challenging performance constraints. This presentation will focus on the past mission applications of optical fiber assemblies, including: qualification information, lessons learned, and new technological advances that will enable the road ahead.

Keywords: space flight, optical fiber, lunar, connector, mars, ISS, communication, Mercury, laser

1. INTRODUCTION

Optical fiber systems have been utilized in space flight hardware for over thirty years,[1] starting with the first optical fiber passive in flight environmental testing at the Long Duration Exposure Facility in 1978. In 1989, the Cosmic Background Explorer (COBE) satellite included several photonic and optical fiber components. The system functioned accurately enough for the Principal Investigators, John C. Mather of Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC) and George F. Smoot of Lawrence Berkeley National Labs, to become Nobel Prize in Physics laureates in 2006.[2] Over the next decade, several NASA missions had base-lined optical fiber communication systems, including the International Space Station. In 1992, the Small Explorers Program (SMEX) at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center broke new ground by proving that optical fiber was a viable option for space flight. The SAMPEX, Solar Anomalous and Magnetospheric Particle Explorer, was the first mission out of the SMEX program; it launched in 1992. It was designed for a 1-year mission duration. Today – 16 years later – it is still functional for science data, and it utilizes the first GSFC-flown optical fiber MIL-STD-1773 communications system as the critical link between the science instruments and the space craft. In addition to those missions mentioned, the following is a summary table that was presented in 1999 at Marshall Space Flight Center as an update after the publication in reference 1 was already released.

Table 1: From 1999, this summary was generated to identify which programs had base-lined optical fiber communications for space flight missions as the link for the critical command and handling data system. For this paper, it has been updated to reflect more accurate launch dates

Project Name	Acronym	Launch Date	Technology	Wavelength
Solar Magnetospheric Particle Explorer	SAMPEX	July 1992	MIL-STD-1773,1 Mbps	850 nm
Microelectronic and Photonic Test Bed	MPTB	Dec. 1997	AS1773, 20 Mbps	1300 nm
Microwave Anisotropy Probe	MAP	June 2001	AS1773, 20 Mbps	1300 nm
X-ray Timing Explorer	XTE	Dec. 1995	MIL-STD-1773,1 Mbps	850 nm
Hubble Space Telescope, upgrades	HST	Feb. 1997	MIL-STD-1773,1 Mbps	850 nm
Photonic Space Experiment	PSE	Proprietary	MIL-STD-1773,1 Mbps	850 nm
Tropical Rainforest Measuring Mission	TRMM	Nov. 1997	MIL-STD-1773,1 Mbps	850 nm

Over the decade to follow, more varied applications of optical fibers were utilized at NASA GSFC for science instrumentation. In addition to what is listed above, the International Space Station managed by Johnson Space Center used a Boeing-designed optical fiber data bus called the High Rate Data Link (HRDL). The HRDL was configured with 1300 nm graded index multimode optical fiber links and an enhanced MIL-STD-38999 connector with MIL-T-29504

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termini. The MIL-STD-1773 optical fiber links typically used the MIL-STD-38999 and MIL-T-29504 termini, where in other cases the customized 140 micron Johanson FC type connector was used. This connector is no longer recommended for new space flight missions since Johanson has sold the optical fiber products line. The cables that were used during those missions are also obsolete, and no replacement to the exact dimensional specifications of the GSFC-qualified Brand Rex OC1008 or the International Space Station's version of the Brand Rex OC1416 currently exist. However, a search for a suitable replacement is underway at GSFC.

In addition to the projects mentioned above, the Code 562 Photonics Group at NASA GSFC has been involved in a variety of optical fiber system implementations over the past decade since the MIL-STD-1773 decade. The following is a summary table of how we have enabled flight hardware.

Table 2: NASA Goddard Space Flight Center Photonics Group Heritage with Space Flight Optical Fiber Subsystems Over the Past Decade.

Project	Dates	Design	Qualification Performance over Harsh Environment	Manufacturing	Integration	Failure Analysis
ICESAT, GLAS	1997 - 2005	X	X	GSE		Prototype
ISS	1998 - 2008					Vendor/ Flight
ISS - HDTV	2003	X	X	FLIGHT		
Fiber Optic Data Bus	1997 -2000	X	X			
Messenger – MLA	2001 - 2004	X	X	FLIGHT	X	
Sandia National Labs (DOE)	1998 -2008		FLIGHT			Vendor/ Flight
ISS-Express Logistics Career	2006 -2009	X	X	FLIGHT	X	
Air Force Research Lab	2003, 2008		X			
Shuttle Return To Flight	2004 -2005			FLIGHT		
Lunar Orbiter Laser Altimeter	2003 -2008	X	X	FLIGHT	X	Prototype
Mars Science Lab ChemCam	2005 -2008	X	X	FLIGHT	X	Vendor
Laser Ranging, LRO	2005 - 2008	X	X	FLIGHT	X	Prototype
Fiber Laser IIP/IRAD	2003 - 2006	X	X	QUAL		
ESA/NASA SpaceFibre	2008 (TBD)		X	QUAL		

GSE = Ground System Equipment Assemblies Support
FLIGHT = Actual flight hardware was the subject material.
Vendor = Vendor-supplied hardware

In Table 2, the project name or acronym is listed with the dates of development and the identification of which type of services were performed by the group. When the Photonics group was asked to perform failure analysis during the late stages of integration, the root cause was usually a lack of: failure mode risk mitigation during the design/development process, quality documentation, or proper handling procedures. Most concepts are born from a creative design group who know more about how to capture science data and less about the intricacies of space flight material choices and how to implement appropriate risk mitigation techniques and keep an effective schedule. Too many times we have found that vendors and contractors that make space flight hardware deliveries did not invite well-versed failure mode physicists and engineers to the design table. What followed later was that the optical fiber assemblies were viewed as being similar to copper wire cable harnessing instead of as the micro-optical devices that they actually are. This fallacy has led to many issues during integration that span from design to handling during flight integration. This misconception is also very costly when it happens since it usually has a large impact on integration schedule, where a bulk of the total funding is spent.

2. DISCUSSION OF OPTICAL FIBER SUBSYSTEMS

2.1 Development of subsystems for harsh environments

Based on the extensive work over the past decade related to flight builds and failure analysis of other providers that are not in the high-volume production of space flight hardware, the group has development flow from concept to delivery.

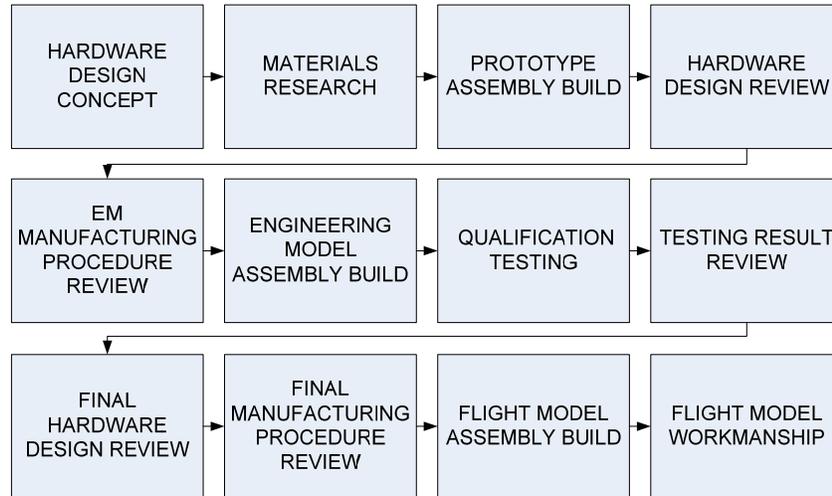


Figure 1: Photonics Group Concept-to-Delivery Flow

Our approach was developed by years of experience and an understanding of risk mitigation for failure modes vs. schedule for typical space flight projects, as well as the fact that nearly all new technologies are commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) and must be tested and developed as such, in order to achieve the least amount of anomalies by the time flight manufacturing begins. An extensive list of quality documentation is required for mission success, whether it be from a vendor or another government manufacturing provider. This is especially true when dealing with COTS parts.

2.2 Approach to Commercial Technologies

Engineering designers should keep in mind that being well educated about the physics of failure is not always feasible for vendors that cannot afford to pay the bill to go through extensive testing as they once did for the military to ensure compliance to military specifications. This is essentially what the space flight development engineer is doing when specifying to a vendor that the vendor must comply with a long list of military standards. There is no incentive for a vendor to use precious resources to extensively test their commercial components to a set of unusually harsh environmental parameters when the customer is only going to purchase a few of them on a one-time basis, for a one-of-a-kind instrument.

The expectation that a vendor is obligated to meet a large number of difficult demands for a space flight customer for the purpose of stating that a partnership exists is not beneficial to the vendor since it will not produce the business it would take to justify the costly expenditure. It is important that even the component engineers understand that to achieve high reliability, they themselves need to be responsible for making that happen between analysis and testing, and they'll need to work very closely with the vendors to provide guidance that will enable success.

Most commercial processes that are designed for high volume cannot be changed to accommodate a space flight build of a particular component. The analysis – especially with regards to processes and construction – can lead to suggestions to the vendor. However, if the process change involves extra money spent on the part of the vendor, it's not likely going to be feasible without a very costly non-recurring engineering fee that the space flight program will need to fund. The old saying that “you can get a cheap job done, but it won't be good, or you can get a good job done, but it won't be cheap” needs to be considered when tailoring commercial parts for space use. Many vendors are even going away from compliance with the Telecordia certifications since the majority of their customers today are not commercial

telecommunications providers but are industrial customers using light for manufacturing of their products. Even if a part was originally part of the telecommunications components base 7 years ago and was tested to Telecordia standards, the same part being produced today may no longer be tested to those standards.[5]

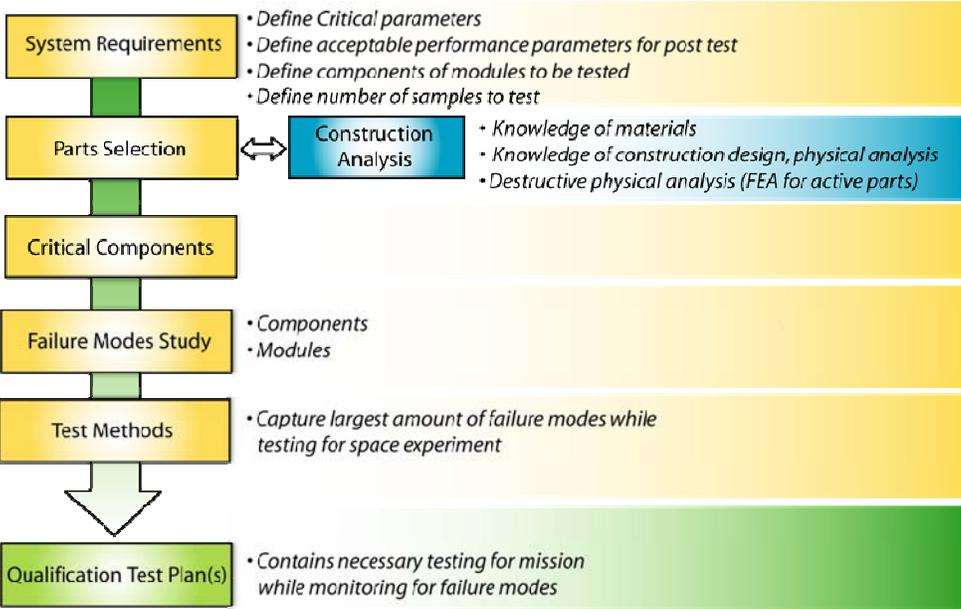


Figure 2: Steps to a Qualification Test Plan; NEPP Technology Assurance Approach [6]

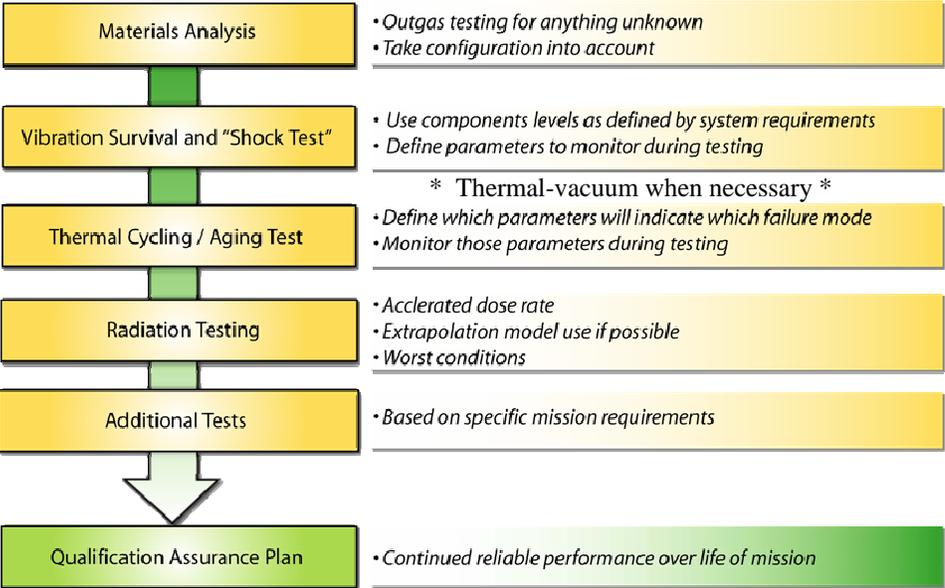


Figure 3: COTS Qualification Plan Approach [6]

Figures 2 and 3 summarize the steps in development of reliable commercial optical fiber assemblies and then show how to qualify or perform requirements validation on the engineering models such that the flight models will be ready for the mission. Reference 5 presents a more comprehensive explanation of the details. Many of those details are reflected in the product flow of Figure 1. If there is one key item of note from the above figures, it would be that having a good understanding of how materials affect other materials when performing packaging of optical fiber hardware can save a great deal of funding later in development and integration.

3. FLIGHT EXAMPLES AND CURRENT TECHNOLOGY

In the last decade, two connector types have emerged for harsh environment applications: the USConec MTP array connector type for parallel communications using multimode ribbon fiber and the Diamond AVIM DIN type connector with active alignment for single or multimode applications. The Diamond AVIM was qualified for flight applications during the mid-1990s by Lockheed Martin [7] and has continued to be used and qualified by NASA and ESA since then. The first time NASA Goddard used the AVIM connector was for single and multimode interconnections on the Ice, Cloud, and land Elevation Satellite (ICESAT) GeoScience Laser Altimeter (GLAS). Four different types of fiber were used: two types of multimode and two types of single mode. In addition, a 2 kilometer single mode optical fiber delay line was implemented for use on orbit calibration.[8] During the development of GLAS, several optical fiber candidates were tested for radiation-induced scintillation effects, and no results that would affect performance were detected.[9] The standard AVIM connector continued to be used on the Mercury Laser Altimeter (MLA), Shuttle-Return-to-Flight High Definition heat tile sensor camera, and will be used on the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter that is ready to launch later this year.

The MTP connector was developed for communications applications and to be compatible with the newly available Vertical Cavity Surface Emitter Laser (VCSEL) technology that arrived in the mid 1990s. The first NASA GSFC mission scheduled to fly this connector was the Spaceborne Fiber Optic Data Bus (FODB). Several qualification studies on the connector and cable assembly were conducted for NASA and the Department of Energy and published in the past decade. [10-12]

3.1 The Mercury Laser Altimeter (MLA)

The MLA was a laser altimeter launched in 2004 to measure the topography of Mercury. As part of the receiver optics system, four individual step index multimode fibers were linked from the receiver optic telescopes to the MLA individual detectors. The AVIM connector with FLEXLITE cable from W.L. Gore was used to provide these optical fiber links. The requirements validation testing was conducted prior to flight manufacturing and published in reference 13.

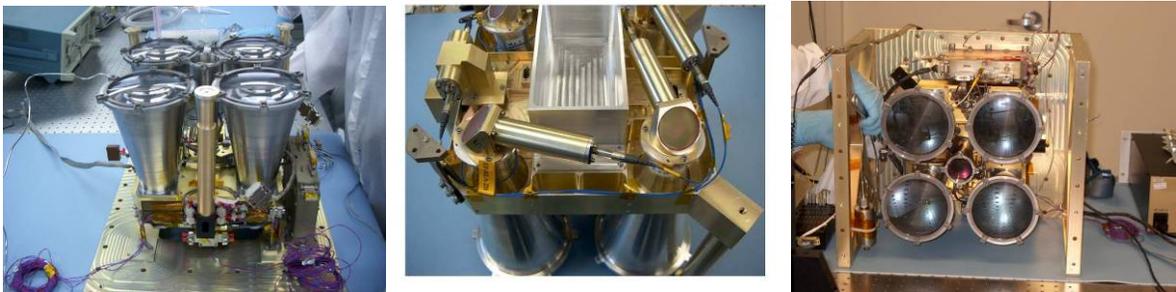


Figure 4: The Mercury Laser Altimeter consisted of four telescopes with fiber coupled from each to four individual detectors.[13]

An experiment that was conducted with the Mercury Laser Altimeter in May 2005 provided the assurance that laser communications could traverse long distances through space. A laser system built and designed at GSFC, called "HOMER" [14] and located at NASA Goddard's Geophysical and Astronomical Observatory, was used to contact the MLA aboard MESSENGER on its way to Mercury and established a ranging link across 24 million kilometers. [15-16]. This gave the Principal Investigators new insight into what was possible. This will be discussed later when the subject of the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO) adds a laser ranging capability to the instrumentation already planned.

The Lunar Orbiter Laser Altimeter on LRO

The Lunar Orbiter Laser Altimeter is part of the instrument suite on the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, and where the Mercury Laser Altimeter consisted of four telescopes and is designed to be capable of measuring with a 0.5 m precision, LOLA consists of only one telescope and will produce a 0.1 meter precision. Both altimeters were designed to function using short-duration pulsed 1064 nm lasers and to measure the timing of the reflections. LOLA uses a diffractive optical

element to split a single laser beam into five separate pulsed beams with five very precisely positioned optical fibers behind the receiver optics to link each beam to its designated detector. The time-of-flight measurements provide ranging information, the pulse spreading corresponds to surface roughness, and the return energy indicates the surface reflectance. The five spots will provide slopes along and across the orbit track.[17] In addition, one of LOLA's detectors will be used to monitor the laser ranging signals received by a 532 nm pulsed laser located at the NASA Goddard Greenbelt facility. Figure 4 shows the flight instrument from an artist's rendition of the LOLA instrument and the LRO.

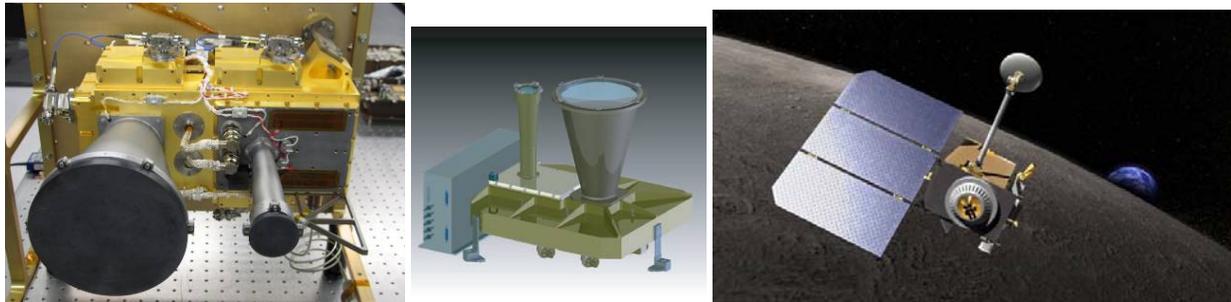


Figure 4: a) LOLA flight instrument, b) artists drawing of LOLA instrument, c) artists drawing of LRO.

In order to enable the integrity of the five spots reflected from the surface to the instrument, a fiber array was developed and is first in the world of its type since the entire array is packaged into a single polarization maintaining type Diamond AVIM connector. Figure 5 shows the endface pattern of all five 200/220 micron step index optical fibers in a tightly toleranced pattern along with a picture of one of the LOLA flight assemblies.

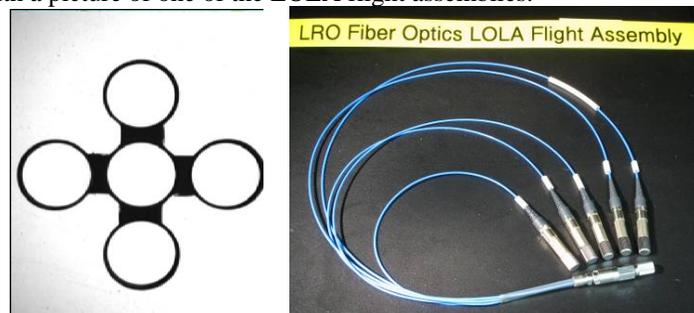


Figure 5: a) LOLA array 200X magnification view of the optical fiber connector endface, b) the LOLA flight bundle array.

In order to ensure high reliability for this application, many qualification tests were conducted, the results of which are contained in reference 18. As a result of the qualification testing, the flight procedures were rewritten, and once again test articles were retested to qualification levels. For LOLA, the 20 grms acceleration profile was used to qualify the engineering models. For flight, a smaller acceleration profile was used for workmanship purposes. Figure 6 shows the production and testing flow required for the LOLA flight hardware as a result of qualification testing.

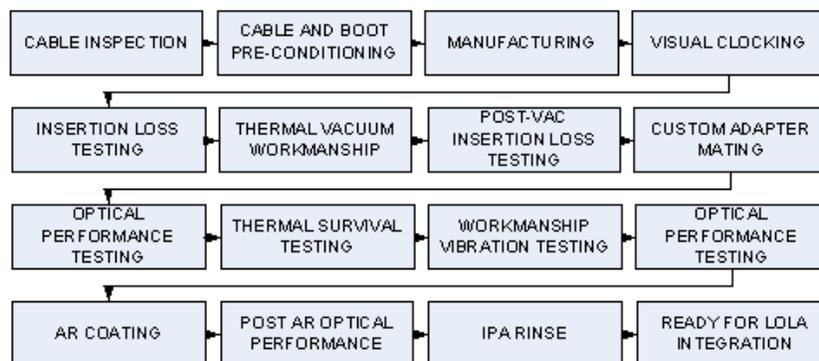


Figure 6: LOLA Optical Fiber Bundle Array Assembly Delivery Flow

This assembly is the first of its kind to be fully qualified for harsh environments and integrated into a single connector on a flight instrument. The LOLA flight assembly integrated to the instrument was tested three times for random vibration: 1) protoflight workmanship, 2) instrument level qualification, and 3) LRO space craft level qualification. The flight assemblies passed all tests.



Figure 7: LOLA flight workmanship random vibration testing a) Frank LaRocca performs vibration testing, b) LOLA flight article on the vibration fixture, c) flight assembly final inspection post vibration testing

3.3 Laser Ranging on the LRO

After the success of ranging with the MLA, the “Laser Ranging” project was added to the LRO mission instrument suite. A small telescope was mounted to the High Gain Antenna System (HGAS) on the LRO and required an optical link from behind the telescope across the HGAS gimbals, down its boom, around the deployment mandrel, and across the space craft to LOLA detector channel 1. Figure 8 illustrates the concept.[19]

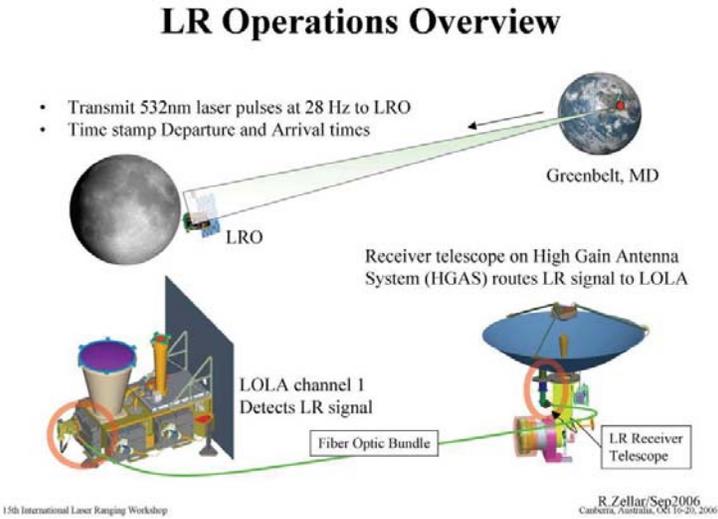


Figure 8: Laser Ranging operations summary

Figure 10 diagrams the flight system components. To complicate matters, two interconnections were required: one at the interface between the steering HGAS gimbals, and one after the boom deployment mandrel at the space craft. The solution to the challenge was developed by the Photonics Group at NASA GSFC to be a seven optical fiber array bundle assembly set, approximately 10 meters long. Figure 9 shows the unique hardware used for this application, and reference 20 presents the qualification data for the engineering models. Reference 21 contains the information regarding integration of the flight hardware. Early on in the development process, the cold requirement was being held at -75 °C. This requirement was incorporated into the choice of using stainless steel 416 instead of the stainless steel 303 material that was originally planned. Even though the thermal requirements were later altered based on thermal conducting tape being used for control, survival testing was conducted down to -75 °C to assure survival of the assemblies. The assemblies passed all qualification testing with nominal changes in performance.[20] Another difficult requirement for

the team was the way in which the fiber cables would be routed through the HGAS gimbals. Essentially, the gimbals contain cable wraps that coil and uncoil the cables to enable the rotation of the antenna for beam steering. Material selection and material compatibility was an enormous issue during development.



Figure 9: LRO Laser Ranging Assemblies

LR Flight System Components

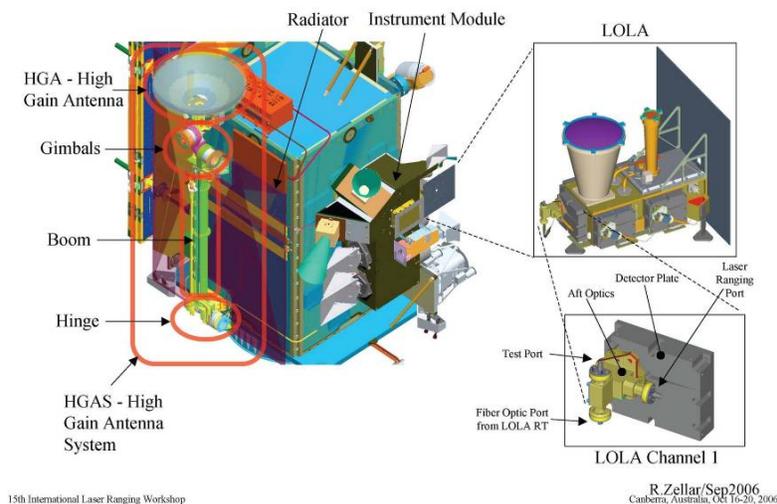


Figure 10: Laser Ranging flight components for optical fiber linkage.

As mentioned previously, documentation is a key item to ensure reliability of the flight hardware. Table 3 lists the documentation required for the Laser Ranging optical fiber bundle assemblies.

Table 3: Quality documentation for the Laser Ranging Flight Assemblies.

Document Title	Document Number
Thermal Pre-conditioning on Flexlite 200/220 μm fibers for flight application	LOLA-PROC-0137
Preconditioning Procedure for AVIM Hytrel Boots for LOLA fiber optic assemblies	LOLA-PROC-0138
Diamond AVIM PM Kit Pre-Assembly Inspection	LOLA-PROC-0104
Ferrule Polishing & Ferrule/Adapter Matching Procedure	LOLA-PROC-0139
Assembly and Termination Procedure for the Laser Ranging Seven Fiber Custom PM Diamond AVIM Array Connector for the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter	LOLA-PROC-0112
Compression Test Procedure for Fiber Optic Connector	LOLA-PROC-0141
Active Optical Power Optimization Procedure for The Laser Ranging Optical Fiber Array Assemblies	LOLA-PROC-0110
Laser Ranging Fiber-Optic Bundle Optical Test Procedure	LOLA-PROC-0107
Insertion Loss Measurement Procedure for The Laser Ranging Optical Fiber Array Bundle Assemblies	LOLA-PROC-0111
Mating of Two LR 7-Fiber Optical Fibers Using Cleanable Adapter	LOLA-PROC-0142
Cutting Back The Kynar Strain Relief For Integration	LOLA-PROC-0143
Fiber Optic Bundle Inspection and Insertion Loss Measurement	LOLA-PROC-0148

The flight assemblies have been integrated to the space craft and have passed all qualification testing. LRO is scheduled for launch later this year.

3.4 Mars Science Laboratory ChemCam

For the Mars Science Lab's (MSL) ChemCam, the Photonics Group, in cooperation with the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) team of Chris Lindensmith, Charles Hays, Richard Rainen, Edward Miller, and Principal Investigator Roger Weins from Los Alamos National Labs, developed custom optical fiber assemblies. Once again, as with LRO, the mission mechanical requirements included routing the optical fiber assemblies through moving gimbals and down a boom. During the early stages of development, the MSL thermal requirements for the ChemCam assemblies were $-143\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ for survival lower limit and $+110\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ for the high limit. The high thermal survival temperature was set to accommodate a decontamination vacuum bake-out that would be necessary for all MSL hardware. This is a precaution to avoid planetary contamination from the space craft to Mars.

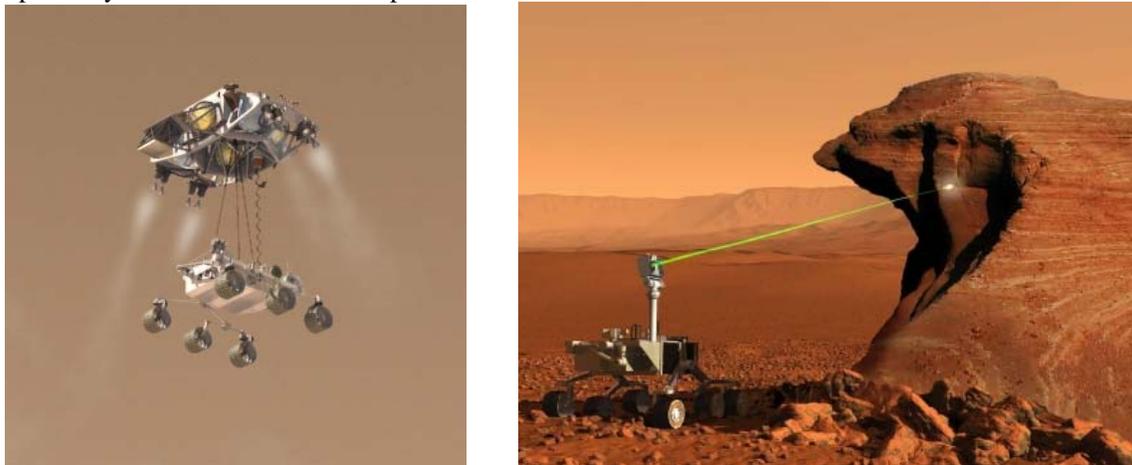


Figure 11: Artist's rendition of Mars Science Lab ChemCam[22]

While thermal bake-outs are considered a typical protocol for all space flight instrumentation, the thermal limit on the hot end of the spectrum is usually less. Again, for its superior thermal performance, the AVIM connector, along with the W.L. Gore FLEXLITE cable, were the clear choices. Some qualification testing was conducted by the Photonics Group of GSFC while other tests were conducted at JPL. By the time thermal life testing started, the requirements had changed to $-55\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ to $+50\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$, with the high temperature bake-out still to occur at $+110\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$.



Figure 12: Frank LaRocca and Richard Chuska manufacture and deliver the flight optical assemblies for MSL.

Again, as with LRO, the lower limit of the survival thermal range was controlled through the use of neptape for conductive heating. The quality documentation was extensive and is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Quality documentation for manufacturing and delivery of the ChemCam optical fiber assemblies.

Document Name	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-FON1482-INSP
Optical Cable Inspection	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-THERM-PC
Cable Thermal Pre-Cond	562-PHOT-WOA-MSL-BOOTS
Polymers Degas	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-RAD (12-day worst-case cobalt60 radiation testing)
Mission Survival Radiation Total Dose Testing	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-VIBE (7.9grms to 14.4grms step-up vibration on selected samples)
Mission Survival Vibration Qualification	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-THERM-CYCLE (100+ cycles including planetary bake-out)
Mission Survival Thermal Cycling Testing	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-MAN-92 (Patch Cables)
FC Cable Manufacturing (non-flight)	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-MAN-92-332 (Prototype Development)
AVIM Cable Manufacturing (non-flight)	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-MAN-332-EM (Eng Models)
AVIM Cable Manufacturing (flight-like)	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-MAN-332-FM (FLIGHT and FLIGHT Spares)
AVIM Cable Manufacturing (FLIGHT)	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-INS-92-332
Insertion Loss Testing (All-Cables)	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-WKM-92-NONFL (Non-flight workmanship)
Non-flight Cable Workmanship Testing	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-WKM-332-FLIGHT (FLIGHT workmanship)
FLIGHT Workmanship Testing	GSFC-PHOTONICS CABLE TRAVELER REV 080101
MSL CABLE TRAVELER	GSFC-PHOTONICS ENGINEERING DOCUMENT REVIEW
Engineering Documents Review	GSFC-PHOTONICS PRE-SHIPMENT PROCEDURE CHECKLIST
Pre-Shipment Inspection Checklist	GSFC-PHOTONICS PACKING PROCEDURE CHECKLIST
Cable Packing Procedure Checklist	562-PHOT-QAD-MSL-FON1482-INSP

The Mars Science Lab is scheduled to launch in 2009.

3.5 Express Logistics Carrier on International Space Station.

The Express Logistics Carrier is being developed as a “smart” warehouse for the International Space Station (ISS). The communication “brains” of the warehouse or the Flight Control Unit (FCU) will be transmitting data to and from the ISS. The FCU will provide: remote terminal to the ISS, the bus controller for up to two science experiments, command distribution and telemetry collection for up to two science experiments, Ethernet to High Rate Data Link (HRDL) playback of science data experiments, command distribution, and telemetry collection for the Experiment Control Module and the Power Module. The High Rate Data Link (HRDL) is an optical fiber communications bus developed for ISS by Boeing. The transceivers for the optical fiber communication for the ELC FCU communications with the HRDL are being manufactured by Space Photonics Incorporated. Space Photonics or SPI originally worked under the company name of Optivision over ten years ago as the transceiver provider for the Space Borne Fiber Optic Data Bus (FODB). The MTP connector was qualified for the maiden voyage of this communications system, but the flight for FODB was cancelled during qualification testing of the subsystem components due to instrument re-scoping on Earth Orbiter 1.



Figure 13: a) Robert Switzer holds the manufactured assemblies b) optical fiber assemblies for the SPI transceiver ready for shipment, c) SPI transceivers with the optical fiber pigtail packaging completed.

The standard AVIM with custom-drilled pilz ferrules and FLEXLITE combination was selected for the SPI transceivers and manufactured by the Photonics Group. The fiber had to match that of the ISS HRDL and was 100/140 micron graded index optical fiber manufactured by Nufern. At this time, the engineering models are being tested for compatibility with the HRDL system before the flight models are built. The remaining cable harnessing will be built by the Photonics Group using the ISS custom cable still in supply and the ISS version of the MIL-STD- 38999 with MIL-T-29504 termini. Additional hybrid assemblies to fan out the 38999 terminations to the AVIM adapters at the FCU interface are being built for interfacing the HRDL connector assemblies to the FCU.

4. FUTURE MISSIONS AND TECHNOLOGIES

It is expected, based on current requests, that single connector arrays will continue to be in high demand due to the successful development of the custom array bundles developed for both LOLA and Laser Ranging on LRO. No longer will designers be constrained by having the receiver detectors near the transmitters. Fiber lasers are a viable technology for harsh environments, and terminations will be necessary for implementation. The NASA Photonics Group continues to encourage emerging technologies through development efforts for flight projects and through evaluation programs of vendor-provided technologies through the NASA Parts and Packaging Program.

The MTP is expected to continue as a viable option for multimode communications. The group is continuing the evaluation of this connector to provide greater thermal stability of the MTP terminations since the “how” of an optical fiber assembly procedure is just as important as the “what” of an optical fiber assembly.

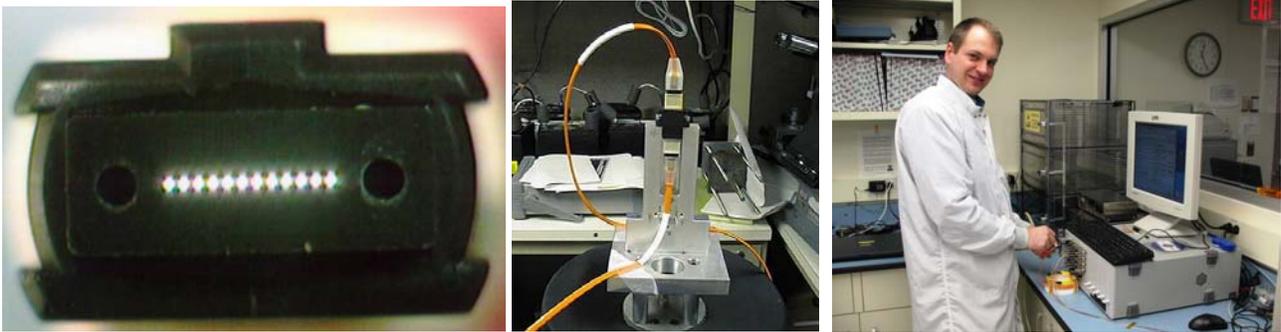


Figure 14 a) MTP connector endface, b) an MTP interconnection begin evaluated for vibration performance, c) Joe Thomes conducts insertion loss testing on the MTP assemblies for a DOE qualification study.

In addition to the MTP connector for communication purposes, science instruments will still require optical fiber arrays of various types for moving light from one location on the instrument to another. Single connector arrays tailored to a variety of harsh environments and remote locations will continue to be of interest.



Figure 15: a) 200 X magnification of a 19 optical fiber array endface ferrule in an FC connector, b) Close up of FC ferrule and connector, c) 19 fiber custom array technology.

The road ahead includes smaller connectors to accommodate board-to-board communications inside of electronics boxes, laser communications from station to station for future planetary base systems, remote laser systems for instruments and communications applications for the future intersatellite configurations, and optical subsystems that can withstand

extreme thermal environments for planetary exploration and for testing configurations on the ground. Currently, the group is developing new capabilities in the areas of customized arrays, high-power terminations for fiber laser and laser transmission systems, and high-performance small form factor configurations for board interconnects.

CONCLUSION

The Photonics Group will continue to develop and evaluate various technologies for the upcoming missions identified in the NASA Decadal survey [23], interconnection for small-form factor applications and for high-performance and reliability missions such as that outlined for Constellation. We provide guidance to vendors for their flight builds as well as providing small volume customized versions for instrumentation and communication systems for vendors and other government agencies. Although commercial versions of the technologies described here may exist, most vendors and agencies still require specialized guidance, especially with regards to the physics of failure when building high-performance and high-reliability optical subsystems for harsh environments.

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