



## Airborne laser sensors and integrated systems

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### ABSTRACT

The underlying principles and technologies enabling the design and operation of airborne laser sensors are introduced and a detailed review of state-of-the-art avionic systems for civil and military applications is presented. Airborne lasers including Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR), Laser Range Finders (LRF), and Laser Weapon Systems (LWS) are extensively used today and new promising technologies are being explored. Most laser systems are active devices that operate in a manner very similar to microwave radars but at much higher frequencies (e.g., LIDAR and LRF). Other devices (e.g., laser target designators and beam-riders) are used to precisely direct Laser Guided Weapons (LGW) against ground targets. The integration of both functions is often encountered in modern military avionics navigation-attack systems. The beneficial effects of airborne lasers including the use of smaller components and remarkable angular resolution have resulted in a host of manned and unmanned aircraft applications. On the other hand, laser sensors performance are much more sensitive to the vagaries of the atmosphere and are thus generally restricted to shorter ranges than microwave systems. Hence it is of paramount importance to analyse the performance of laser sensors and systems in various weather and environmental conditions. Additionally, it is important to define airborne laser safety criteria, since several systems currently in service operate in the near infrared with considerable risk for the naked human eye. Therefore, appropriate methods for predicting and evaluating the performance of infrared laser sensors/systems are presented, taking into account laser safety issues. For aircraft experimental activities with laser systems, it is essential to define test requirements taking into account the specific conditions for operational employment of the systems in the intended scenarios and to verify the performance in realistic environments at the test ranges. To support the development of such requirements, useful guidelines are provided for test and evaluation of airborne laser systems including laboratory, ground and flight test activities.

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### Contents

1. Airborne laser technology . . . . .	16
1.1. Laser radars . . . . .	17
1.2. Receiver detection techniques . . . . .	17
1.3. Laser range finders . . . . .	18
1.4. Airborne lasers in multi-sensor systems . . . . .	18
1.5. Civil applications . . . . .	19
1.5.1. LIDAR remote sensing . . . . .	19
1.5.2. LIDAR obstacle detection and avoidance systems . . . . .	20
1.5.3. Differential absorption LIDAR . . . . .	20
1.5.4. Tuneable laser absorption spectroscopy . . . . .	21
1.5.5. Laser turbulence detection system . . . . .	21

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1.5.6.	Landslide monitoring	22
1.5.7.	Bathymetry	22
1.5.8.	Laser gated television	22
1.5.9.	3D building reconstruction	22
1.6.	Military applications	23
1.6.1.	Directed energy weapons	23
1.6.2.	Laser guided weapons	24
1.6.3.	Laser target designators	24
1.7.	RPAS specific applications	25
1.8.	Laser communication systems and data links	25
2.	Airborne lasers performance analysis	26
2.1.	Laser range equation	26
2.2.	Comparison of incoherent and coherent detection techniques	27
2.3.	Laser beam propagation in the atmosphere	27
2.3.1.	Atmospheric transmittance for airborne lasers	28
2.3.2.	Molecular absorption and scattering	28
2.3.3.	Nonlinear propagation effects	30
2.3.4.	Combined propagation equation	32
2.3.5.	Computer codes and databases	32
2.3.6.	Vertical and oblique path propagation	33
2.3.7.	Propagation through haze, fog and rain	33
2.3.8.	Propagation through atmospheric turbulence	34
2.4.	Laser scattering and target cross section	36
2.4.1.	Dependence on target area	37
2.5.	Military systems operational considerations	37
2.5.1.	Airborne mission geometry	37
2.5.2.	Error sources	37
2.5.3.	System error budget	39
3.	Airborne lasers eye-safety analysis	39
3.1.	Laser safety standards	39
3.2.	Ocular hazard distance	39
3.3.	Hazard area, buffer zone and extended buffer zone	40
3.4.	Safety verification algorithm	41
3.5.	Test and training safety procedures	42
3.6.	Operational considerations	42
4.	Airborne laser systems test and evaluation	42
4.1.	Modelling and simulation for systems testing	43
4.1.1.	Performance Prediction	43
4.1.2.	Eye-safety verification	44
4.1.3.	Mission planning and effectiveness evaluation	44
4.2.	Laboratory experimental activities	45
4.2.1.	Laser beam profiling	45
4.2.2.	Surface reflectance measurements	45
4.2.3.	Bandwidth	47
4.2.4.	Detection threshold	47
4.2.5.	Test of protection filters	48
4.3.	Ground experimental activities	49
4.3.1.	Frame rate optimisation	50
4.3.2.	Spot quality	51
4.3.3.	Boresight and bearing/pointing accuracies	52
4.3.4.	Field of view	52
4.3.5.	Angular resolution	52
4.4.	Flight test activities	52
4.4.1.	Test requirements and methods	53
4.4.2.	Flight test instrumentation and experimental measurements	55
4.4.3.	Examples of experimental measurements	58
5.	Conclusions	60
	References	60

## 1. Airborne laser technology

Throughout the 1950s, significant research efforts were devoted to laser technology and some practical applications started to emerge. Since then, a large number of R&D programmes have been carried out on lasers, which have led to a rich diversity of systems, ranging from laboratory devices used for studying non-linear optical emissions and propagation, to eye-safe, compact and inexpensive laser-ranging binoculars. Over the years, military

interests in airborne laser systems have concentrated in four general areas: Laser Rangefinders (LRF) and Target Designators (LTD), laser radars (Light Detection and Ranging – LIDAR), Laser Communication Systems (LCS) and Directed Energy Weapons (DEW). Although military lasers are significantly different from those in the public domain, the transfer of military technologies (i.e. powerful laser sources and other electro-optical devices) has resulted in numerous civil applications, including 3D mapping, turbulence detection, wireless power transmission and ground

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