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Aerial Delivery System with High Accuracy Touchdown

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Bourakov et al.

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(54) **AERIAL DELIVERY SYSTEM WITH HIGH ACCURACY TOUCHDOWN**

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B64D 17/00 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
USPC **244/152**

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
USPC 244/53 R, 138 R, 17.17, 139, 152
See application file for complete search history.

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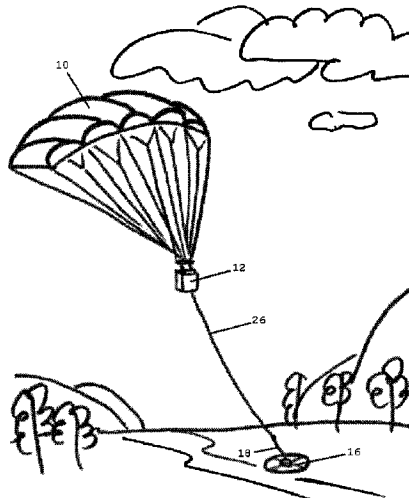
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

Embodiments described herein provide a system and method for persistent high-accuracy payload delivery utilizing a two-phase procedure during the terminal descent phase of aerial payload delivery. In the first phase a small parafoil provides aerial delivery of a payload to within a close proximity of an intended touchdown point, e.g., a target. In the second phase a target designator acquires the target and a trajectory to the target is determined. A harpoon launcher deploys a harpoon connected to the payload by an attachment line, such as a rope. A reel mechanism reels up the attachment line causing the payload to be moved to the target thus providing high accuracy touchdown payload delivery.

4 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



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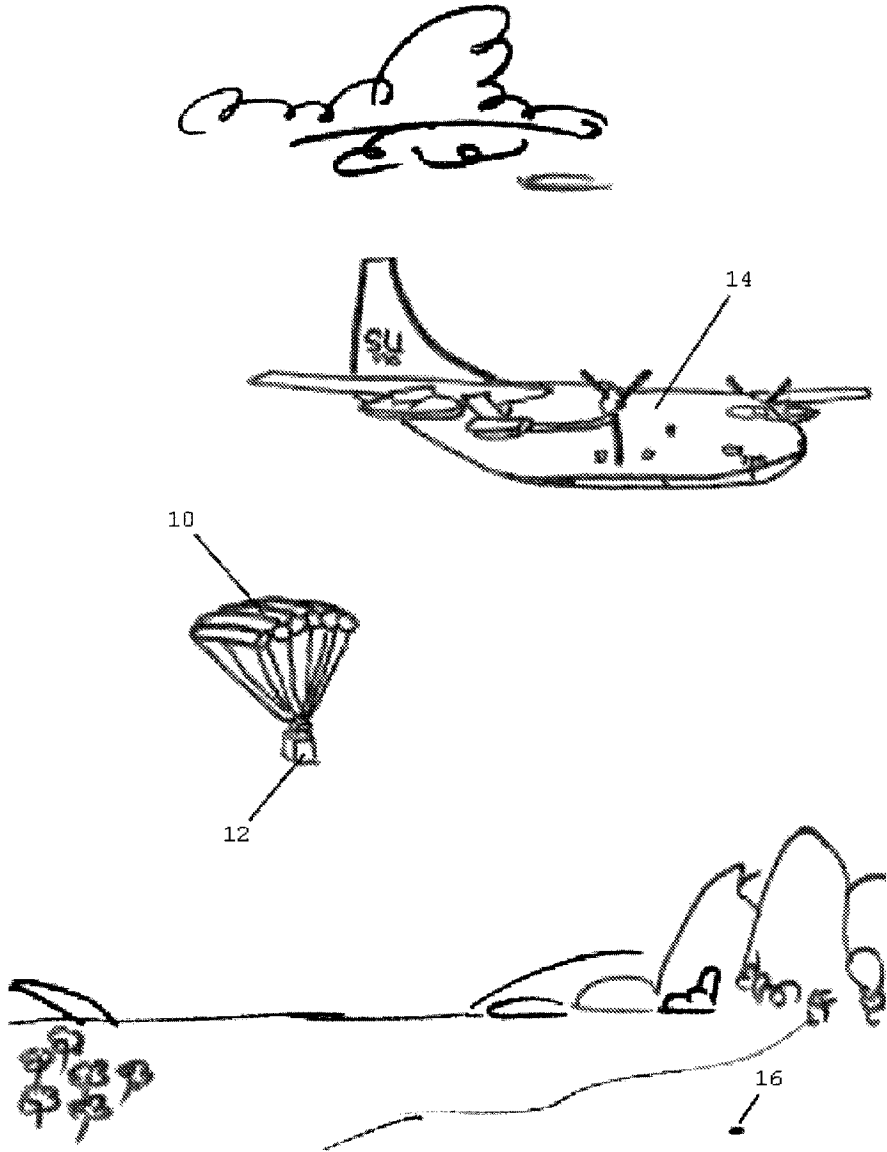


FIG. 1

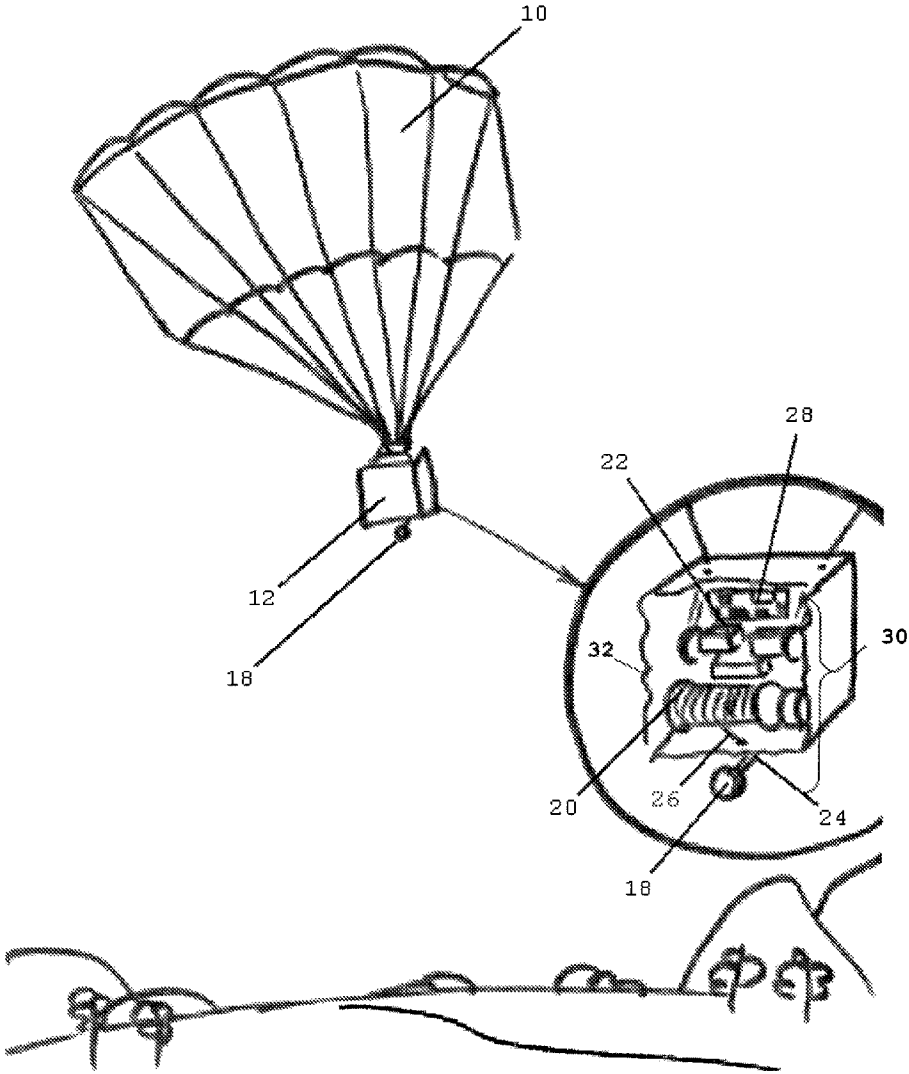


FIG. 2

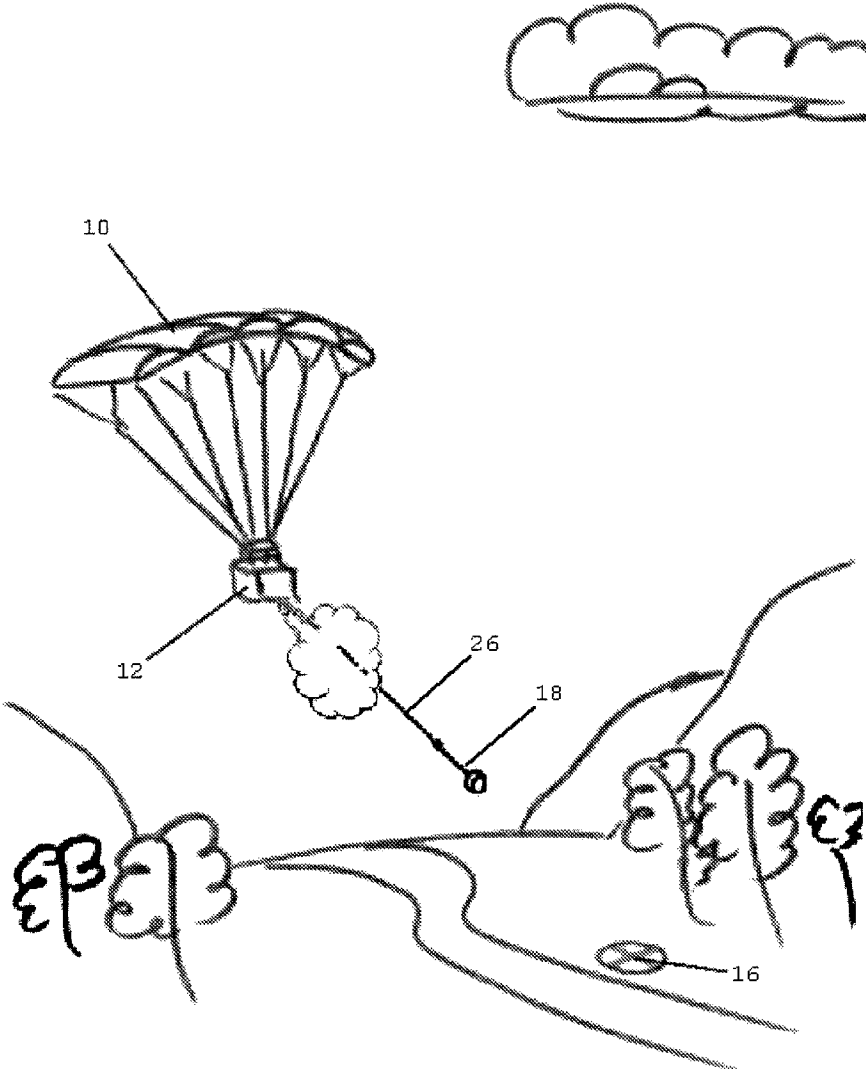


FIG. 3

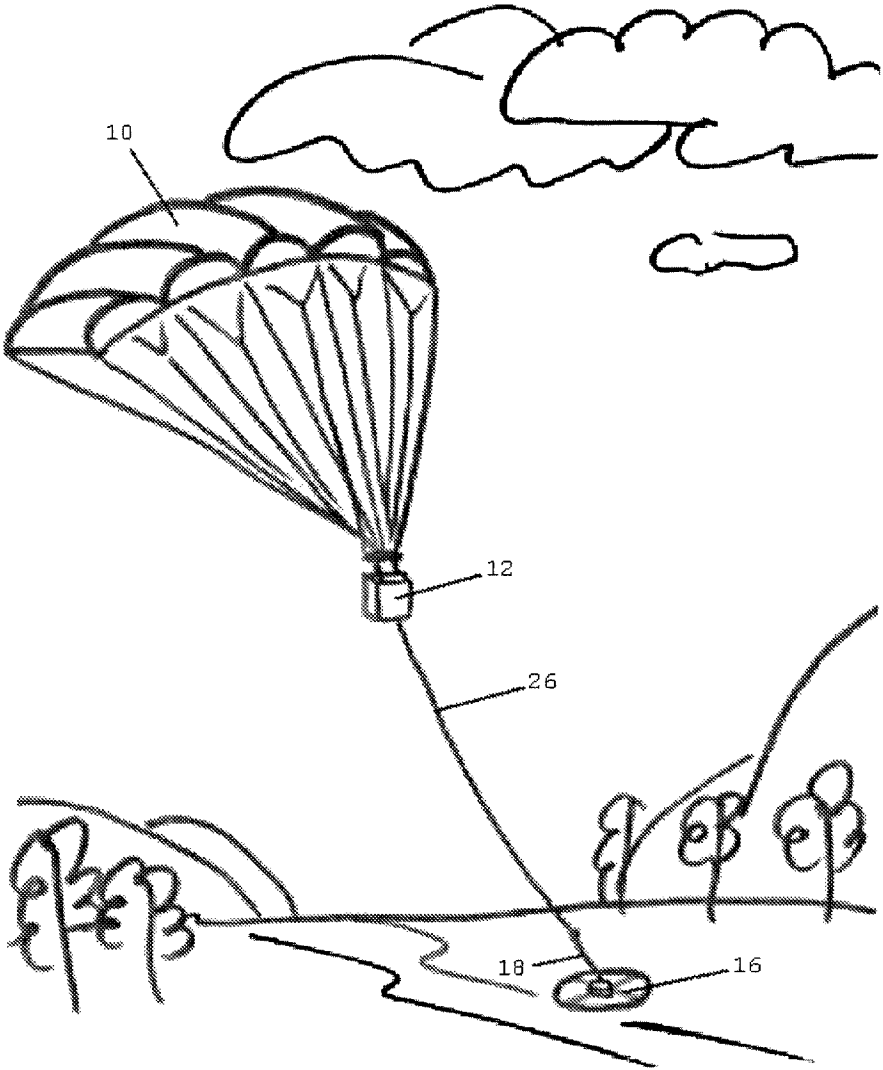


FIG. 4

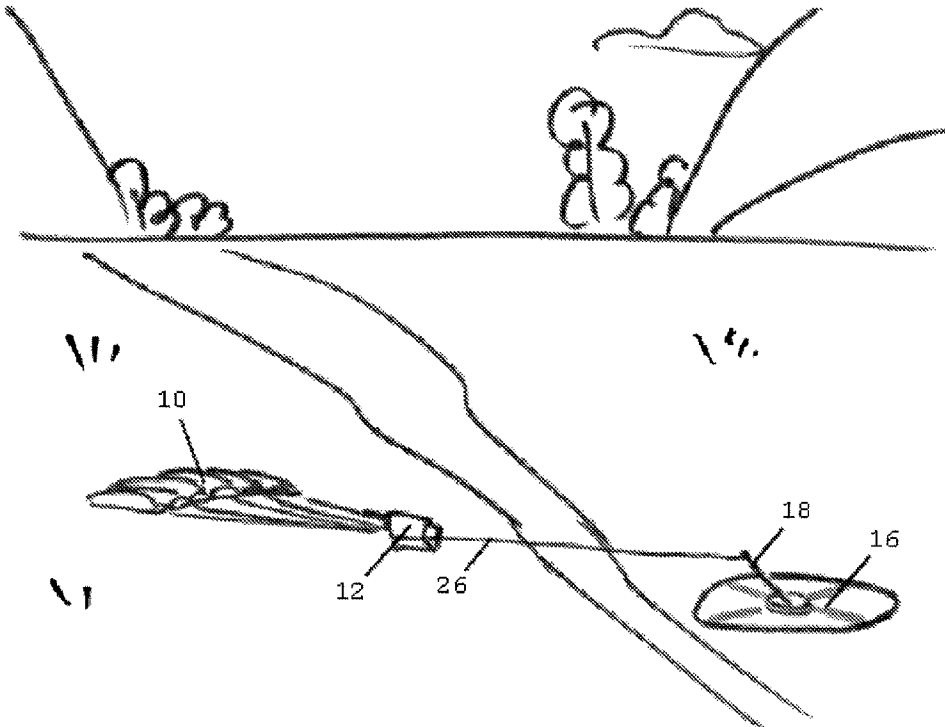


FIG. 5

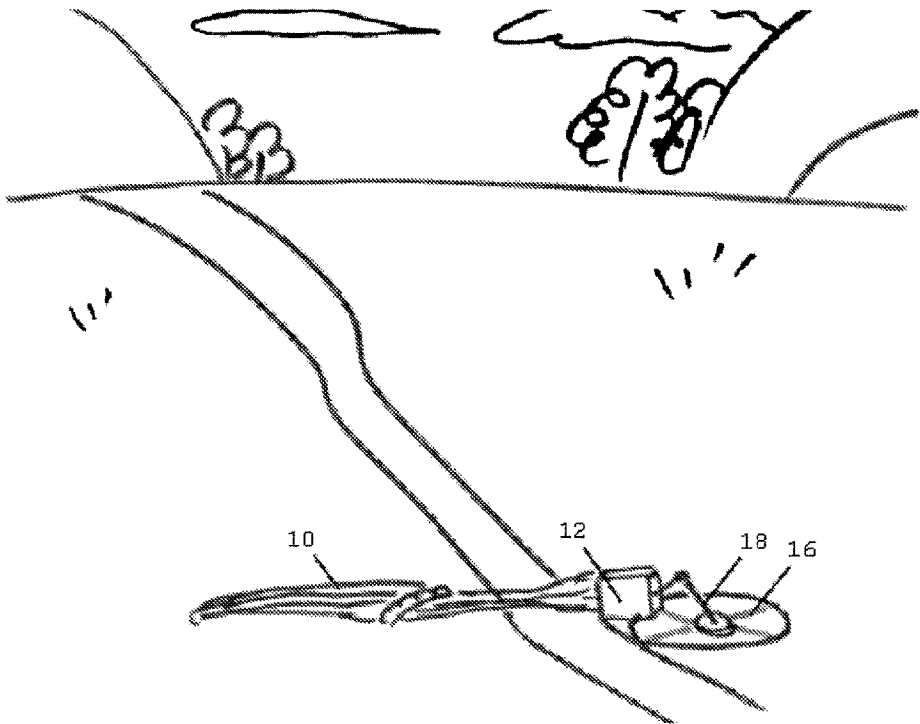


FIG. 6

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AERIAL DELIVERY SYSTEM WITH HIGH ACCURACY TOUCHDOWN

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 61/316,217, filed Mar. 22, 2010, which is hereby incorporated in its entirety by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to aerial delivery systems, and, more particularly, to parafoil-based payload delivery systems.

2. Description of the Related Art

Maneuverable ram-air parafoils are widely used today. The list of users includes skydivers, smoke jumpers, and specialized defense forces. The extended range of ram-air parafoils compared to round parachutes makes ram-air parafoils very practical for payload delivery. Further, the touchdown accuracy requirement for parafoil-based systems should be much tighter than round parachutes, but it largely depends on a guidance, navigation and control (GNC) unit to produce and execute the corresponding steering commands.

Recent introduction of the Global Positioning System (GPS) made the development of fully autonomous ram-air parafoils possible. Autonomous parafoil capability means delivery of the parafoil system, typically including a payload, to a desired landing point, e.g., a target, from a release point using an onboard computer, sensors and actuators. A navigation subsystem manages data acquisition, processes sensor(s) data, and provides guidance and control subsystems with information about the parafoil. Using this information along with local wind profiles, the guidance subsystem determines the delivery and generates a feasible descent trajectory all the way down to the desired impact point, i.e., the target. The control subsystem tracks this trajectory using the information provided by the navigation subsystem and onboard actuators.

Introduction of the GPS (Global Positioning System) allowed the development of fully autonomous different-weight aerodynamic decelerator systems. Realistically, it was desirable to have payloads aerially delivered from large standoff distances with persistent <100 m circular error probable (CEP) accuracy. Accordingly, during the last decade, several GNC concepts for gliding parachute applications have been developed and tested. Specifically, some systems were demonstrated during Precision Airdrop Technology Conference and Demonstrations (PATCAD) held at the U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground, Yuma, Ariz., e.g., PATCAD-2001, PATCAD-2003, PATCAD-2005, PATCAD-2007, and PATCAD-2009, and Precision Airdrop Demonstration Capability PCAD-2006 and PCAD-2008 held near Bordeaux, France. However, touchdown accuracy of parafoil systems was still problematic, especially with small parafoils having light weight payloads. Accurate delivery of a light-weight payload (10-15 pounds) with a small parafoil on target was very difficult because small parafoils are very sensitive to wind, e.g. the trajectories are easily impacted by wind.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Embodiments in accordance with the invention address the terminal phase of the guided descent of a parafoil delivered payload, where the majority of errors contribute to the final touchdown accuracy. Embodiments in accordance with the

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invention can be beneficially implemented in the area of light weight payload (10-15 pounds) delivery by a small aerial parafoil. Such small parafoil systems are very sensitive to wind.

In accordance with one embodiment, persistent high accuracy touchdown payload delivery is attained by implementing a two-phase aerial delivery procedure. The first phase employs a small parafoil air delivery of a payload within close proximity of a target. The second phase employs a target designator and harpoon launcher that provide high accuracy delivery of the payload by anchoring the payload to the target with a harpoon and rope deployed from the harpoon launcher, and subsequently reeling the payload to the target.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

A complete understanding of the present invention may be obtained by reference to the accompanying drawings, when considered in conjunction with the subsequent, detailed description, in which:

FIG. 1 illustrates a parafoil delivering a payload after being dropped from an aircraft in accordance with one embodiment.

FIG. 2 illustrates the airborne parafoil with payload in accordance with one embodiment.

FIG. 3 illustrates a descent phase when a target is acquired and is in the optical line of sight with a harpoon launcher in accordance with one embodiment.

FIG. 4 illustrates the airborne parafoil in its final descent phase in accordance with one embodiment.

FIG. 5 illustrates the touchdown in accordance with one embodiment.

FIG. 6 illustrates the final delivery when the payload is successfully reeled to the target with high accuracy touchdown in accordance with one embodiment.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

FIG. 1 illustrates a parafoil **10** delivering a payload **12** after being dropped from an aircraft **14** in accordance with one embodiment. In one embodiment, parafoil **10** is a high-glide ratio ram-air parafoil. In other embodiments, parafoil **10** can be a different type of parafoil suitable for delivery of payload **12**.

In one embodiment, parafoil **10** steers towards a target **16** in accordance with directions provided by a guidance, navigation and control (GNC) system.

In one embodiment, there are two phases of the final descent phase of parafoil **10**. The first phase, herein also referred to as final phase one, is descent of parafoil **10** within a close proximity of target **16**. The second phase, herein also referred to as final phase two, is anchoring of parafoil **10** to target **16** while still in the air, and subsequent reeling of payload **12** to target **16** as further described and shown in FIGS. 2-6. More specifically, in final phase two, a target trajectory is determined by a GNC system, and a harpoon, or other attachment device, is deployed from payload **12** and anchored at target **16**. A rope, or other attachment mechanism, connecting the harpoon and payload **12** forms a link between payload **12** and target **16**. Payload **12** is then moved to target **16** as the connecting rope is reeled up, thus providing high accuracy touchdown of payload **12** delivery to target **16**.

FIG. 2 illustrates airborne parafoil **10** with payload **12** in accordance with one embodiment. In one embodiment, payload **12** includes a high accuracy touchdown delivery system **30** together with one or more mission related components, also referred to herein as one or more sub-payload(s) (not

shown). For example, the one or more sub-payloads, can include but are not limited to medical supplies, food, electrical equipment, and munitions. In one embodiment, high accuracy touchdown delivery system **30** includes: a guidance, navigation and control (GNC) system **28**, an optical target designator **22**, a harpoon **18**, a harpoon launcher **24**, a reel mechanism **20**, and a rope **26** attached to harpoon **18** at one end, e.g., a front end of the rope, and attached to reel mechanism **20** at the opposite end, e.g., a back end of the rope. In some embodiments, payload **12** is encased partially or completely in a protective container **32**.

In one embodiment, reel mechanism **20** includes a reel that allows rope **26** to be taken up on to the reel after deployment. Reel mechanisms are well known to those of skill in the art and are not further described in detail herein. Rope **26** can be any of a variety of deployable connectors, such as natural fiber ropes, synthetic material ropes, metal wire ropes, chain link ropes, or other suitable connector rope. Herein the phrase autonomous parafoil capability means the ability to deliver a payload to a target from a release point (within a corresponding reach distance) using an onboard computer and sensors of a guidance, navigation and control (GNC) system.

In one embodiment, in final phase one, guidance, navigation and control (GNC) system **28** manages data acquisition, processes sensor(s) data, generates a feasible trajectory to a target, e.g., target **16**, and provides guidance and control by onboard actuators. In one embodiment, when parafoil **10** is in close proximity of target **16**, for example, in a range of about 100-200 feet, optical target designator **22** starts to search for target **16**.

FIG. 3 illustrates the phase when target **16** has been designated and is in the optical line of sight with harpoon launcher **24** in accordance with one embodiment. In one embodiment, when target **16** is acquired by optical target designator **22** and is in the optical line of sign with harpoon launcher **24** and is within a distance range of the length of rope **26**, guidance, navigation and control (GNC) system **28** initiates the command to trigger harpoon launcher **24**. In final phase two, harpoon **18** is launched from harpoon launcher **24** and is aurally deployed toward target **16**. Herein harpoon **18** can be any of a wide variety of anchoring tools that can firmly attach to a target, i.e., target **16**, such as at, near or below the surface of target **16**. Thus, for example, in various embodiments, harpoon **18** can be an arrow-type harpoon for dirt grounding, a strong magnet harpoon for a metal surface, a "sticky ball" harpoon made of highly adhesive material for a non-magnetic surface, etc. Herein harpoon launcher **24** can be any of a wide variety of devices that can aurally launch harpoon **18**. For example, in various embodiments, harpoon launcher **24** can be a pneumatic, electromagnetic, pyrotechnic, or other such device that provides harpoon **18** projectile deliveries within about a 100-200 feet range.

FIG. 4 illustrates parafoil **10** in final descent in accordance with one embodiment. During final phase two, parafoil **10** flares down with payload **12** anchored to target **16**.

FIG. 5 illustrates touchdown of payload **12** in accordance with one embodiment. In one embodiment, in final phase two, the canopy of parafoil **10** and payload **12** are on the ground, attached to target **16** by harpoon **18** and rope **26**. Guidance, navigation and control (GNC) system **28** initiates reel mechanism **20** to start spinning, e.g., reeling, causing rope **26** to be taken onto the reel and payload **12** to be moved, e.g., dragged, to target **16**.

FIG. 6 illustrates the final delivery when payload **12** is successfully reeled to target **16** with high accuracy touchdown in accordance with one embodiment. In one embodiment, in final phase two, reel mechanism **20** ceases reeling

action when payload **12** contacts target **16**. Thus, payload **12** has been delivered to target **16** with high accuracy.

It can be understood by those of skill in the art that embodiments in accordance with the invention described herein can be modified to accommodate particular operating requirements and environments, and that the particular embodiments detailed herein are not intended to be limiting of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. An unmanned high accuracy touchdown aerial delivery system for delivery of a payload to a target comprising:
 - an unmanned autonomous ram-air parafoil, said parafoil deployable from an aircraft;
 - a payload connected to said parafoil, said payload comprising:
 - a high accuracy touchdown delivery system, said high accuracy touchdown delivery system comprising:
 - a guidance, navigation and control (GNC) system for providing guidance, navigation and control of said parafoil;
 - a target designator for optical identification of a target;
 - a harpoon launcher for launching a harpoon to said target;
 - a harpoon, said harpoon deployable to said target by said harpoon launcher, said harpoon connected to a rope;
 - a rope, said rope attached to said harpoon and to a reel mechanism, said rope of a length deployable with said harpoon to a said target; and
 - a reel mechanism, said reel mechanism including a reel, said reel mechanism for deploying said rope and for reeling in said rope after touchdown of said payload, wherein said payload is moved to said target providing high accuracy touchdown delivery of said payload to said target.
2. The aerial delivery system of claim 1 wherein said payload further comprises:
 - at least one sub-payload.
3. A method for unmanned aerial delivery of a payload to a target with high accuracy touchdown comprising:
 - deploying an unmanned autonomous ram-air parafoil from an aircraft, said autonomous ram-air parafoil including an attached payload, said payload comprising:
 - a high accuracy touchdown delivery system, said high accuracy touchdown delivery system further comprising:
 - a guidance, navigation and control (GNC) system for providing guidance, navigation and control of said parafoil;
 - a target designator for optical identification of a target;
 - a harpoon launcher for launching a harpoon to said target;
 - a harpoon, said harpoon deployable to said target by said harpoon launcher, said harpoon connected to a rope;
 - a rope, said rope attached to said harpoon and to a reel mechanism, said rope of a length deployable with said harpoon to said target;
 - and
 - a reel mechanism, said reel mechanism including a reel, said reel mechanism for deploying and reeling in said rope;
 - acquiring a target determined by said target designator; determining a trajectory to said target determined by said GNC system;
 - deploying a harpoon from said harpoon launcher to said target, said harpoon being attached to said payload by said rope;
 - attaching said harpoon at said target;

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permitting said payload to touchdown;
after touchdown of said payload, automatically activating said reel mechanism in said payload to start reeling up said rope onto said reel of said reel mechanism, wherein said payload is moved to said target providing high accuracy touchdown delivery of said payload to said target. 5

4. The method of claim 3 wherein said payload further comprises:
at least one sub-payload. 10

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