

Simulation and Testing Assessment of Cruciform Parachutes using LS-DYNA[®] ALE¹

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Abstract

This work presents a model of the coupled aero- and structural dynamics for a cruciform parachute which can then be used to inform development of control schemes for autonomously guided airdrop systems. Currently, the United States Army uses a combination of ram-air parachutes, as part of the Joint Precision Airdrop System (JPADS), and ballistic unguided parachutes to deliver supplies in austere locations. Ram-air parachutes are highly maneuverable systems and when paired with Guidance, Navigation and Control (GN&C) flight software can be highly accurate. While a cruciform or cross parachute is significantly less maneuverable, it may offer a more cost effective alternative to deliver cargo and assist disaster relief efforts. By extending and retracting various suspension lines, which connect the payload to the parachute, different forces and moments can be manipulated for steering control. A two-way fluid-structure interaction (FSI) model was created using the LS-DYNA Arbitrary Lagrangian-Eulerian (ALE) solver. Quantitative and qualitative experimental and flight test data are used to validate the baseline model. Subsequent simulations investigate different control schemes and geometry changes to enable rapid testing and inform/guide future experiments and drop tests.

Introduction

Reliable precision delivery of essential supplies in remote and austere environments is a long standing topic of research within the U.S. Army [1] with solutions ranging from enhancements to traditionally ballistic systems [2] to high performance canopies optimized for high lateral standoff [3]. While all strive to provide the best solution for a given mission scenario, each cargo airdrop concept or configuration has trade-offs between cost and capabilities with manufacturing labor playing a significant factor in system cost. For this reason, interest in low cost systems with some degree of control authority has risen recently, with particular focus on cruciform parachute designs [4]-[9].

Moderate control of a cruciform geometry has been demonstrated in a variety of scenarios and formulations [9]-[10]. Corresponding simulation studies using various commercial or academic software packages have also been executed [11]-[12], providing insight into both the degree of controllability that may be achieved and the governing aerodynamics. While these studies have proven the concept of a steerable cruciform based system, no one solution has proven to be significantly better than another to warrant widespread adoption in the field, leaving the question of cruciform control open for debate.

The mechanism for control described in this research effort is depicted in Fig. 1. After initial deployment, the panels or ‘arms’ of the cruciform are arranged in a ‘pinned’ position, tying all panel corners together; in this configuration, the system is essentially acting as a traditional flat circular canopy, to fall in a predominantly vertical direction. Some side venting is achieved to reduce oscillatory behavior during flight. Upon actuation via a separate control line, one set of corners is released, enabling a venting of air between two adjacent parachute canopy panels. This venting action produces a translational component to the trajectory of the parachute, resulting in control of the direction of flight, while maintaining the majority of the original shape integrity and drag force.

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Given the highly flexible nature of the problem at hand, the Arbitrary Lagrangian-Eulerian (ALE) formulation within LS-DYNA was deemed a viable simulation method. The numerical implementation and the resulting simulation data are presented below. Some preliminary experimental data is also provided with more detailed validation efforts planned at upcoming test events.

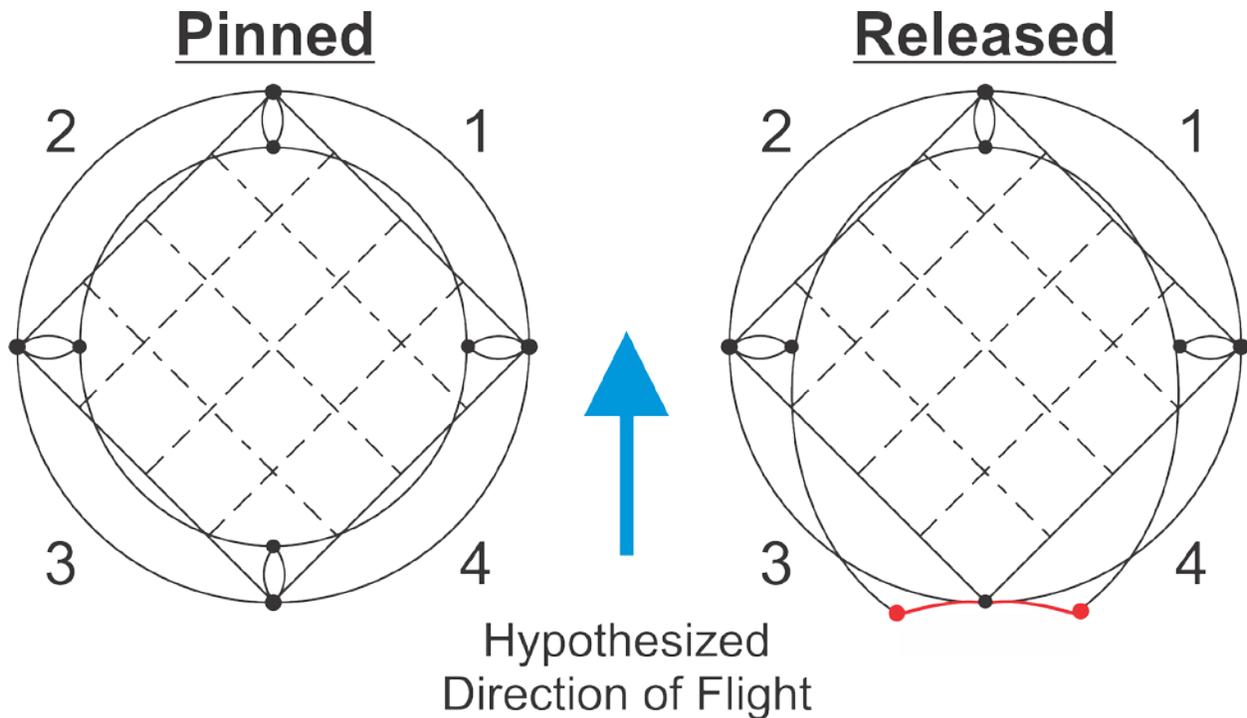


Figure 1: View from confluence point to canopy **Left**, deployment configuration with the corners of all four parachute arms tied or ‘pinned’ together; **Right**, the fully actuated cruciform parachute with air venting occurring to induce a preferred direction of flight.

Methods

Simulation setup

The computational cruciform parachute model was constructed in a manner similar to past LS-DYNA parachute modeling efforts considered by the Natick Soldier Research, Development, and Engineering Center (NSRDEC) [13]. A two-way fluid-structure interaction (FSI) model was created using the LS-DYNA Arbitrary Lagrangian-Eulerian (ALE) solver. The fluid is comparable to air flowing through a vertical column similar to a vertical tunnel and the structure is analogous to the parachute surfaces connected to suspension lines. These are coupled using `CONSTRAINED_LAGRANGE_IN_SOLID`, the wind tunnel is the master, the parachute is the slave coupled as a Lagrangian porous solid to ALE material (`CTYPE = EQ.11`).

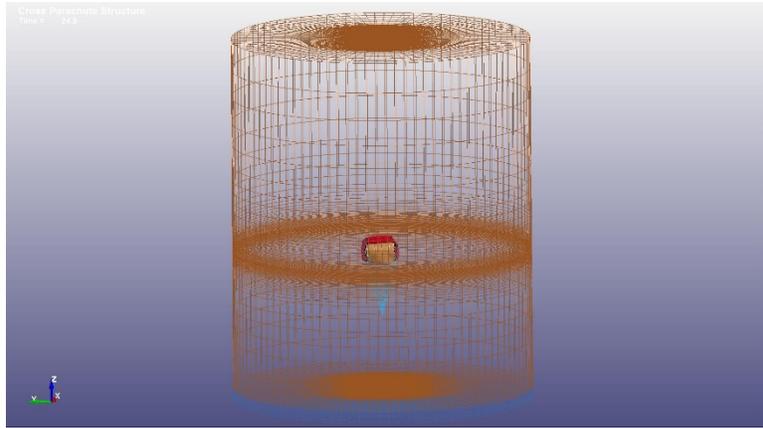


Figure 2: Shows the cruciform parachute within the vertical wind tunnel.

The virtual wind tunnel has a height of approximately 130 ft, radius of 100 ft, and was meshed using 360,000 SOLID elements using 370,000 nodes; this mesh is refined closer to the parachute and immediate wake, as seen in Fig. 2. Nodes at the base are given an upward velocity comparable to parachute descent velocities seen in testing, which in this case is approximately 21 feet per second. This velocity is used by the VZ component in INITIAL_VELOCITY and the BOUNDARY_PRESCRIBED_MOTION_SET. The BOUNDARY_PRESCRIBED_MOTION_SET uses z-translational (DOF=EQ.3), a load curve based in time, and a scale factor for the vertical air velocity. The air represented is constructed using ELEMENT_SOLID and MAT_NULL and with mass density at sea level $1.146 * 10^{-7} \text{ lbf s}^2/\text{in}^4$ (1.22 kg/m^3), pressure cutoff $-.001 \text{ psi}$ (-6.89 Pa) which allows air to cavitate, and dynamic viscosity $2.59 * 10^{-9} \text{ psi * s}$ ($1.78 * 10^{-5} \text{ Pa * s}$).

The parachute structure and dimensions were designed to be similar to the tested parachute. The parachute initial setup can be seen in Fig. 3 and deployed in Fig. 6. The parachute surfaces are built using ELEMENT_SHELL and MAT_FABRIC and suspension lines and limiters (which constrain the in-plane displacement of cruciform arms) are built using ELEMENT_SEATBELT and MAT_SEATBELT. The center area of the parachute is 9 ft by 9 ft, the four arms each measure 9 ft by 7 ft, divided into 1 in by 1 in elements, or 7900 elements and 8300 nodes. Each arm of the parachute is connected to five suspension lines, approximately 20 ft long. Each suspension line is constructed from one node on the parachute, one common node constrained in x-y-z, and one seatbelt element. To get the same overall length, slack length values were determined. Each limiter connects the node of one arm to its adjacent arm, using a single seatbelt element similar to the suspension lines, with a default slack length of 1 in. The slack length for a single limiter was changed in several simulations to create control similar to the experiments. In addition to limiters and suspension lines, seatbelt elements were used to reinforce the parachute edges and surfaces, similar to stitching used during parachute manufacturing.

Parachutes deployment depends on many factors and interactions and is beyond the scope of the present work. Since the focus of this paper is controlling the parachute after inflation and during flight, the start of the simulation is very different than the experimental drop tests, and while initial conditions matter, our focus is after parachute reaches a steady state. To start the simulation, the virtual wind tunnel is allowed to reach proper velocity, as described above with INITIAL_VELOCITY and BOUNDARY_PRESCRIBED_MOTION_SET. The parachute surfaces are constrained against translational motion in the local x-y-z directions for .8 seconds using BOUNDARY_SPC_SET_BIRTH_DEATH, which was found by trial and error, providing sufficient pressure on the parachute to avoid deflation. In addition to a translational constraint and in an effort to

minimize perturbations of initial conditions, parachute nodes along the x- and y-axis are translationally constrained to their respective axis using the same keyword.

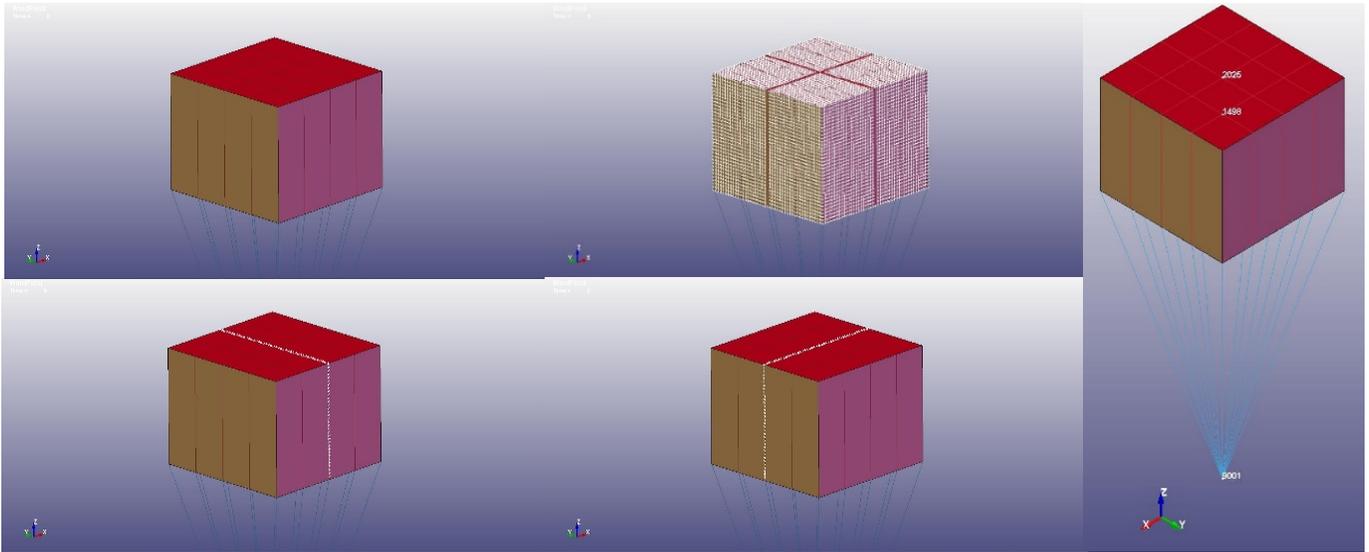


Figure 3: **Top-left**, initial deployment of the parachute; **Top-middle**, nodes translationally x-y-z constrained for 0.8 seconds; **Bottom-left**, nodes are constrained to the x-axis for 5 seconds; **Bottom-middle**, nodes are constrained to the y-axis for 5 seconds; **Right**, show nodes used for heading and pitch calculations.

Simulations were completed on a distributed cluster operated by The U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center (ERDC) through the DoD High Performance Computing Modernization Program (HPCMP). For 30 second of real time simulation or problem time, there were a total of 555,556 cycles, for a total 20 hours and 25 minutes of CPU time. These were distributed on 8 parallel processors using LS-DYNA 971.R7.1.2 double precision. Each tenth of a second of problem time produces roughly 70MB of combined d3plot and binout data.

Experimental description

Full scale drop tests of the system depicted in Fig.1 were conducted on November 9th, 2017 at a commercial drop zone in Eloy, Arizona. The system was deployed twice during the course of a single day from a Skyvan aircraft at an airspeed of 110 knots indicated. The payload weight was 150 lbs. and the total rigged weight, including the parachute, Airborne Guidance Unit (AGU) and payload was 205 lbs. The system was released from an altitude of approximately 6,500 ft Mean Sea Level (MSL); the drop zone altitude was 1,549 ft, leaving 4,051 ft of altitude for flight and maneuvers.

The AGU mentioned above is a control system used on the Joint Precision Airdrop System (JPADS) [1] that houses motors, gearboxes, sensors (GPS, inertial measurement unit, etc.) and a microprocessor that is capable of executing autonomous flight software. In this scenario, one motor was attached to a control line that released the corners of two cruciform arms as described in Fig. 1. The AGU also enabled manual flight control from an independent ground station via a radio frequency communications channel and recorded all flight data for post-processing.

The total stroke available to the motor was 38 inches; this implies that the control line attached to the corners of the cruciform arms could be extended outward by 38 inches. The arms of the cruciform were attached to each other via a ‘limiter’ or piece of ½” tubular webbing to help maintain parachute shape, so in practice, this full stroke was likely not reached.

Throughout the course of each flight, the parachute was deployed with 0% of the total stroke extended. Once stable, the control line was extended in either 10% or 25% stroke increments with a short period between each release to reach a semi-stable flight condition. System configurations for 0%, 50% and 100% stroke are shown below in Fig. 4.



Figure 4: View from payload past AGU to canopy **Left**, deployment configuration with 0% stroke extended and the actuated corners tied together; **Center**, approximately 50% of total stroke deployed; **Right**, 100% of stroke extended to produce the fully deployed configuration. In all images, the actuated corners are at the top of the figure.

Results

Simulation results

LS-PrePost® and MATLAB were used for post analysis. While the goal of these simulations is to rapidly model ideas, the model must produce results which correlate to the real world. There was an effort to create a motor actuated equivalent model which could provide stroke increments using a combination of BOUNDARY_PRESCRIBED_MOTION_NODE and ELEMENT_SEATBELT_SLIPRING, but for this paper, new simulations were executed with varying slack lengths. Six models were created with a limiter's slack length varying from 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, and 100%.

When looking into building a closed-loop control for this type of parachute, there are two important figures of merit: heading, ψ , and pitch, θ or angle of attack. The heading was determined using a node on the parachute surface and its location relative to the center most node on the surface. The pitch was determined using the same center most node on the surface and the point where all suspension lines meet at the confluence point.

In Fig. 5, the heading and pitch are shown for varying simulated actuations in stroke. It is interesting to note that the parachutes all rotate in a similar direction. There could be some underlying mechanics in the seatbelt slack length definition for the limiters, which encourages a clockwise rotation. Three of the four seatbelt limiters were constructed with N2 counter-clockwise of N1, viewed from confluence point to canopy. It is unclear if the seatbelt slack is created symmetrically or from either node, which could affect moment of inertia inducing rotations. The limiter designed to create translational component was constructed with N2 clockwise of N1. Since there is no control algorithm, there is reason to suggest, as the stroke increases from 40% to 100%, interactions with the canopy and fluid flow may provide a controllable turn rate. Since actuations of 0% to 20% provide no to little changes in flow, other factors may lead to some randomness. The relatively small heading

changes seen in the simulations qualitatively match the behavior exhibited during drop tests, providing some initial qualitative verification of the simulated dynamics.

The pitch in Fig. 5 provided more distinct characteristics. As the opening between arms increases, more air escapes, creating a driving force in the opposite direction. While the next step is to run the simulations longer, after deployment, the pitch can be correlated with the different strokes. This can also be seen in Fig. 6, the view is looking at the parachute through the x-y plane, and any pitch can be seen relative to the center of the parachute and the node where all suspension lines meet. The parachute is shift slightly for the 0% case but is more distinctive in the 100% case. There is also a pressure change seen on the surface of the parachute, utilizing Fringe Component tools in LS-PrePost which will be compared in future flight tests.

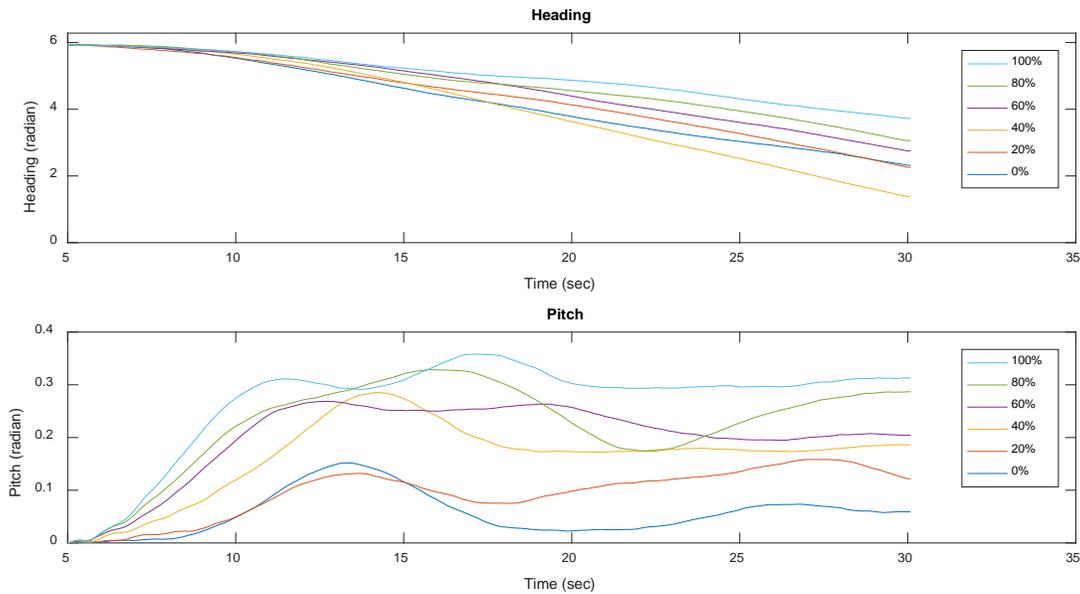


Figure 5: Above is the heading and pitch at varying simulated actuated in strokes.

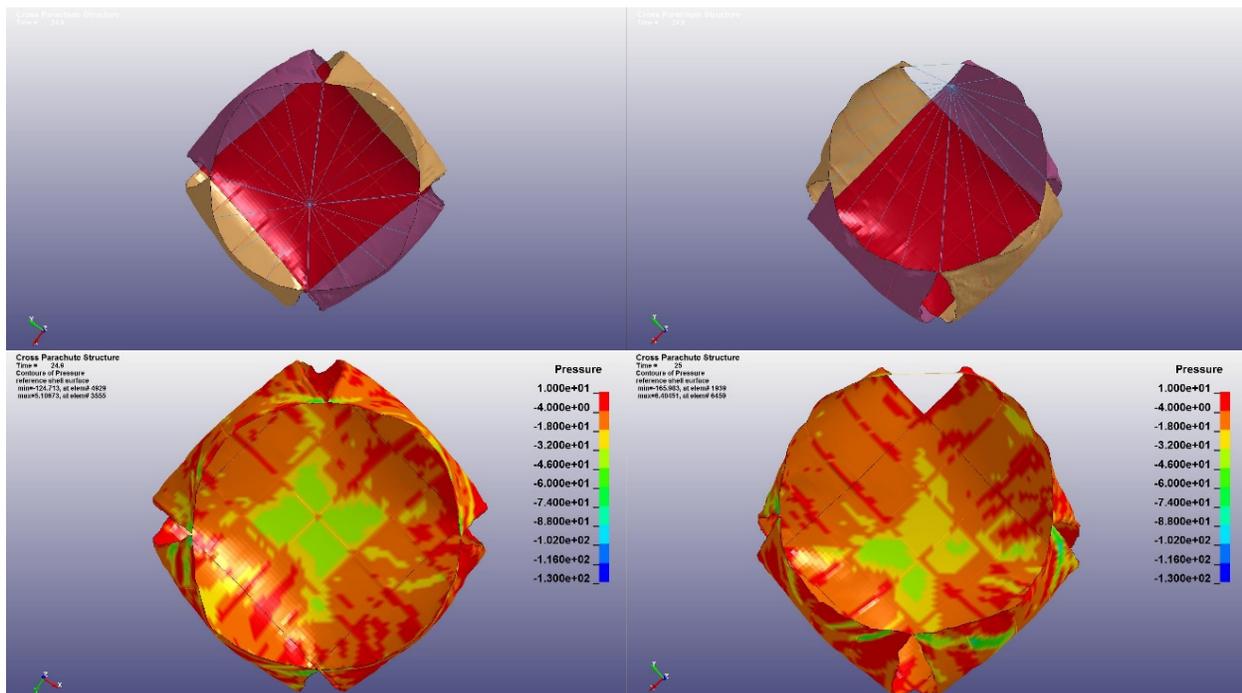


Figure 6: **Top-left**, simulation equivalent to deployment configuration with 0% stroke extended and the actuated corners tied together, as viewed from below; **Top-right**, 100% of stroke equivalent extended to

produce the fully deployed configuration, as viewed from below; **Bottom-left** pressure distribution for 0% stroke extended; **Bottom-right** pressure distribution for 100% stroke extended.

Experimental results

While the experimental results are very preliminary at this point and the time in flight at each stroke setting is relatively short, some interesting behavior can be observed.

The data depicted in Fig. 7 below is from the first flight of the system, which was actuated in stroke increments of 25%. Individual stroke actuations below 50% produced relatively little control of the system heading. However, once 50% of stroke was achieved, some stability of heading was evidenced at approximately 68.4 seconds.

A second instance of controlled heading can be seen at about 80 seconds of flight. Here, the motor was actuated from 0% to 100% of stroke, inducing what appears to be system directionality along a stable heading.

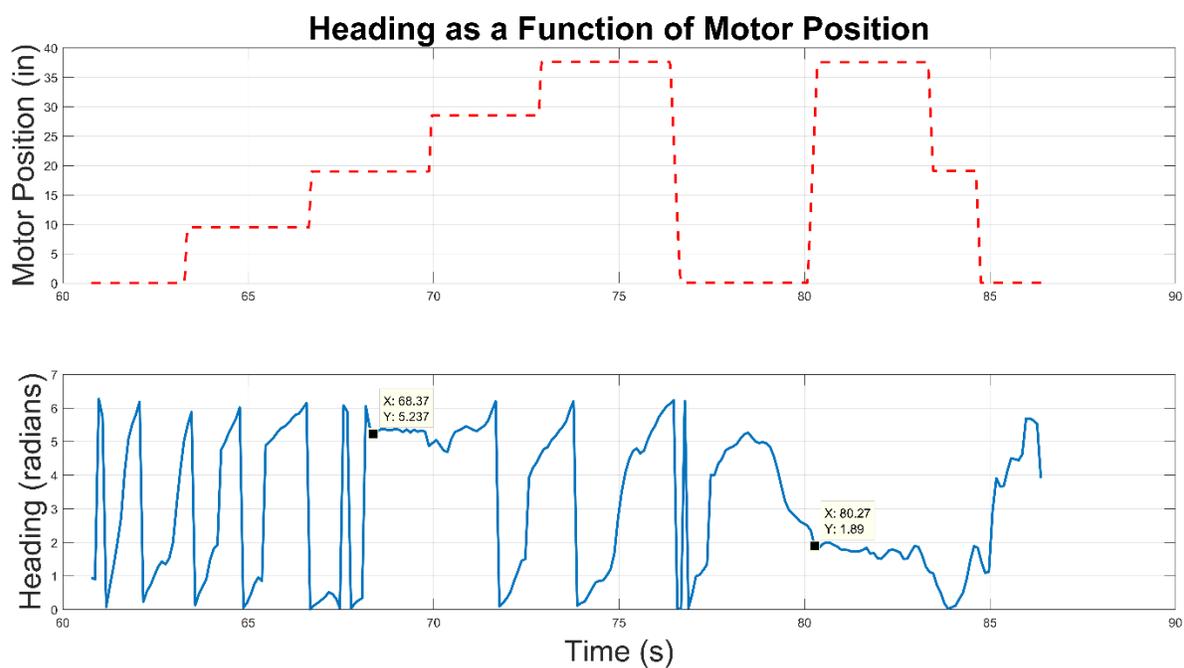


Figure 7: **Top**, the motor position is shown with actuations of 25%, 50%, 75% and 100% stroke length. **Bottom**, the system's heading as derived from GPS data. During the transition from 0% to 100% of stroke at approximately 800 seconds, a degree of heading control is achieved.

Conclusions

This paper presents a brief overview of the use of LS-DYNA simulation tools in the characterization of experimental parachute designs under consideration by the U.S. Army NSRDEC. Computational results are quantitatively compared with initial experimental findings, providing confidence in the numerical methods employed. These comparisons show favorable controllability results that will be further explored in future computational and experimental efforts.

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