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(54) **INFLATABLE PLASTIC ARTICLES WITH SEALED INTERNAL ILLUMINATION**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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An inflatable blimp replica formed of thin plastic sheet, includes: a. an inflatable main chamber having walls which define the perimeter of the air space within the main chamber, and a gondola extending downward from the bottom wall, b. an inner chamber having a central part an open top part, and a closed bottom part, wherein the top part intersects and is heat sealed in an air tight manner to the top wall, the central part extends downward through the main body, and the bottom part extends into the gondola, such that the main chamber can be closed and inflatable notwithstanding the intersection of the inner chamber through the top wall, and c. an illumination sub-assembly within the inner chamber including at least one LED, a replaceable electric battery at the top part, and control means for controlling when the LED is switched on and off.

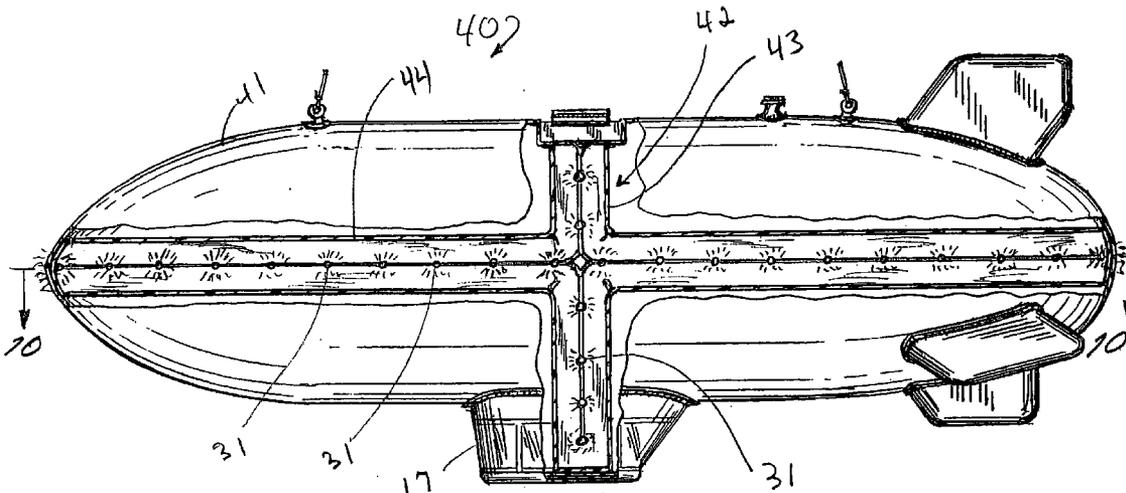
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Related U.S. Application Data

(60) Provisional application No. 60/851,803, filed on Oct. 13, 2006.



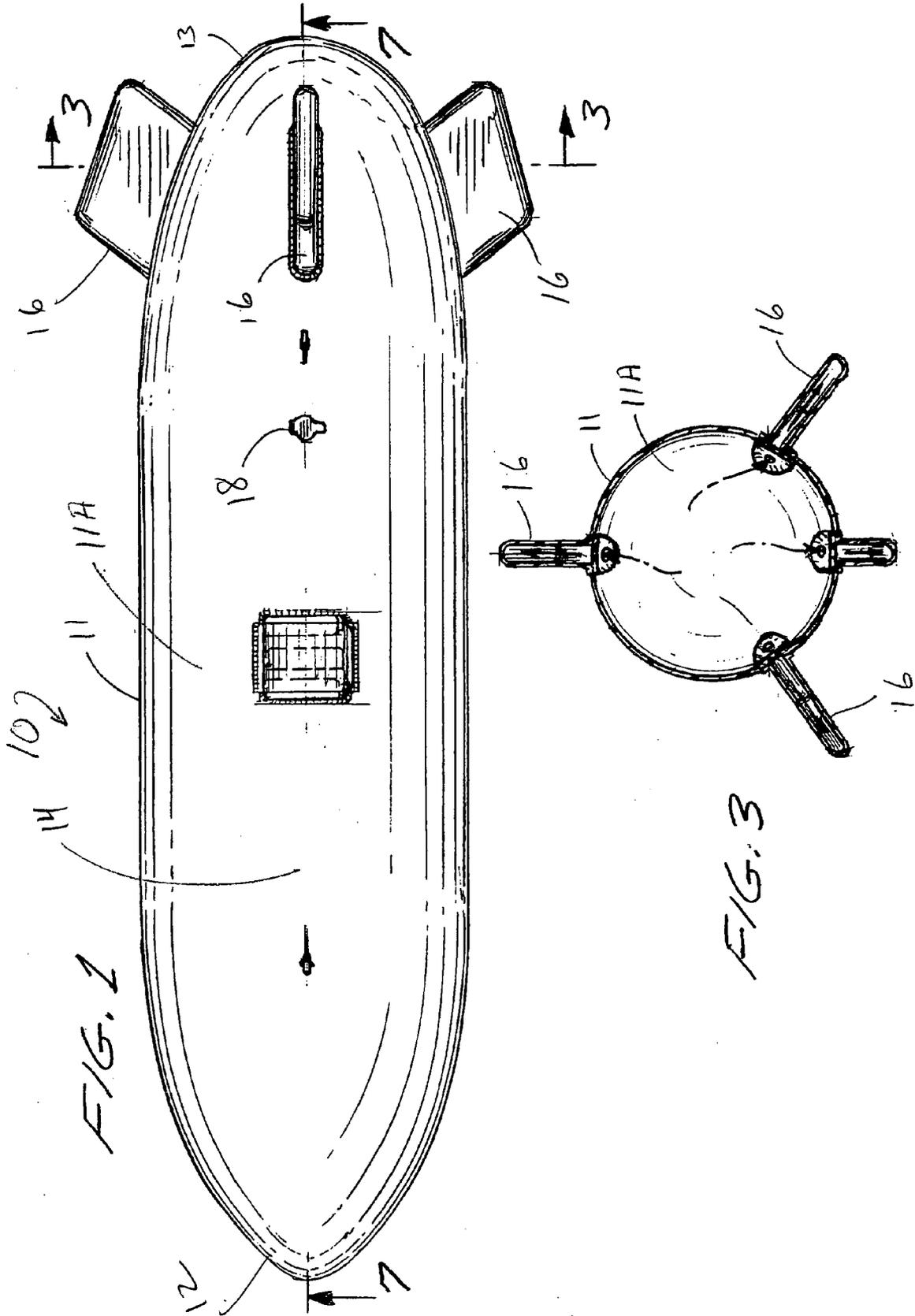
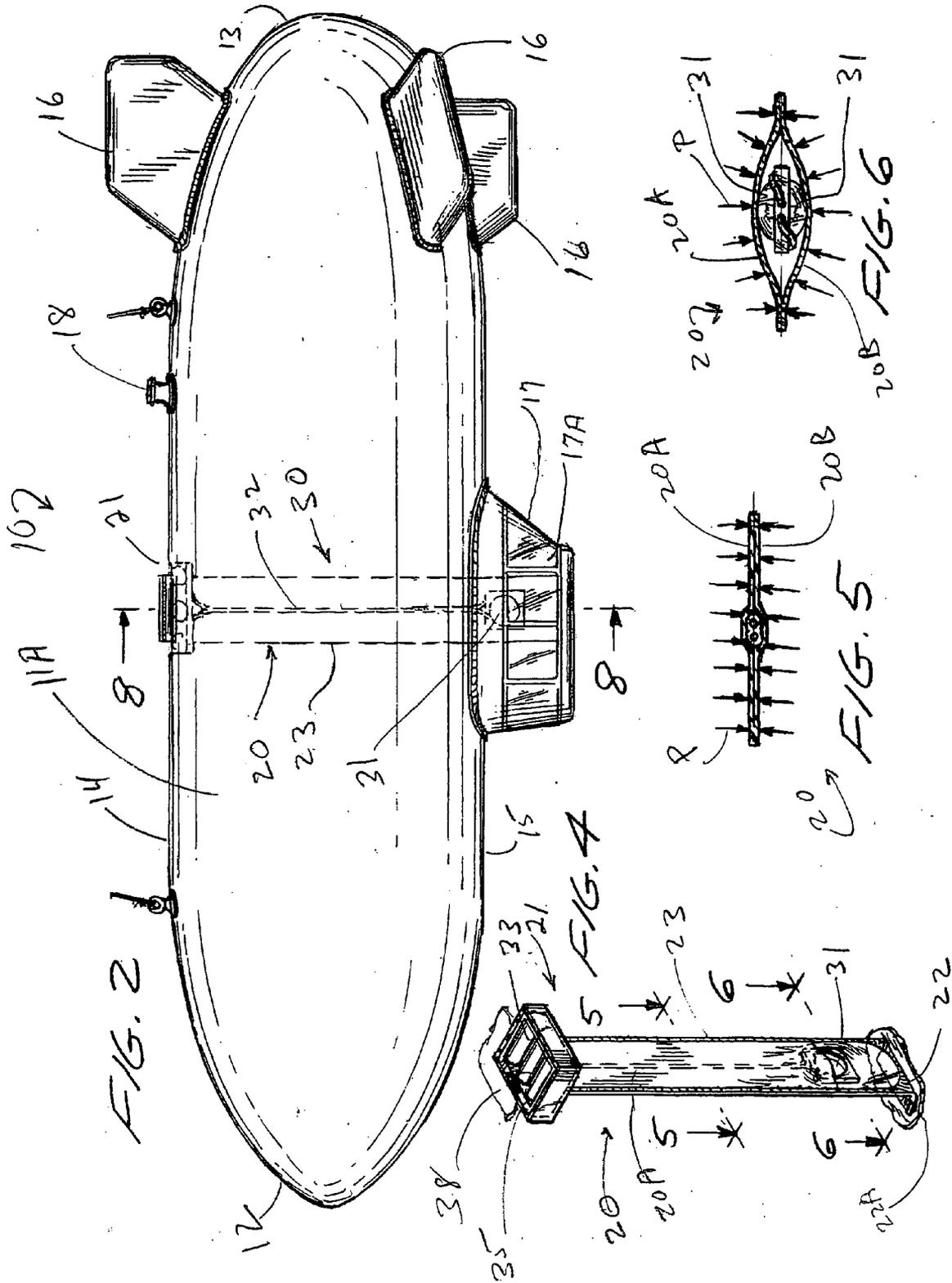
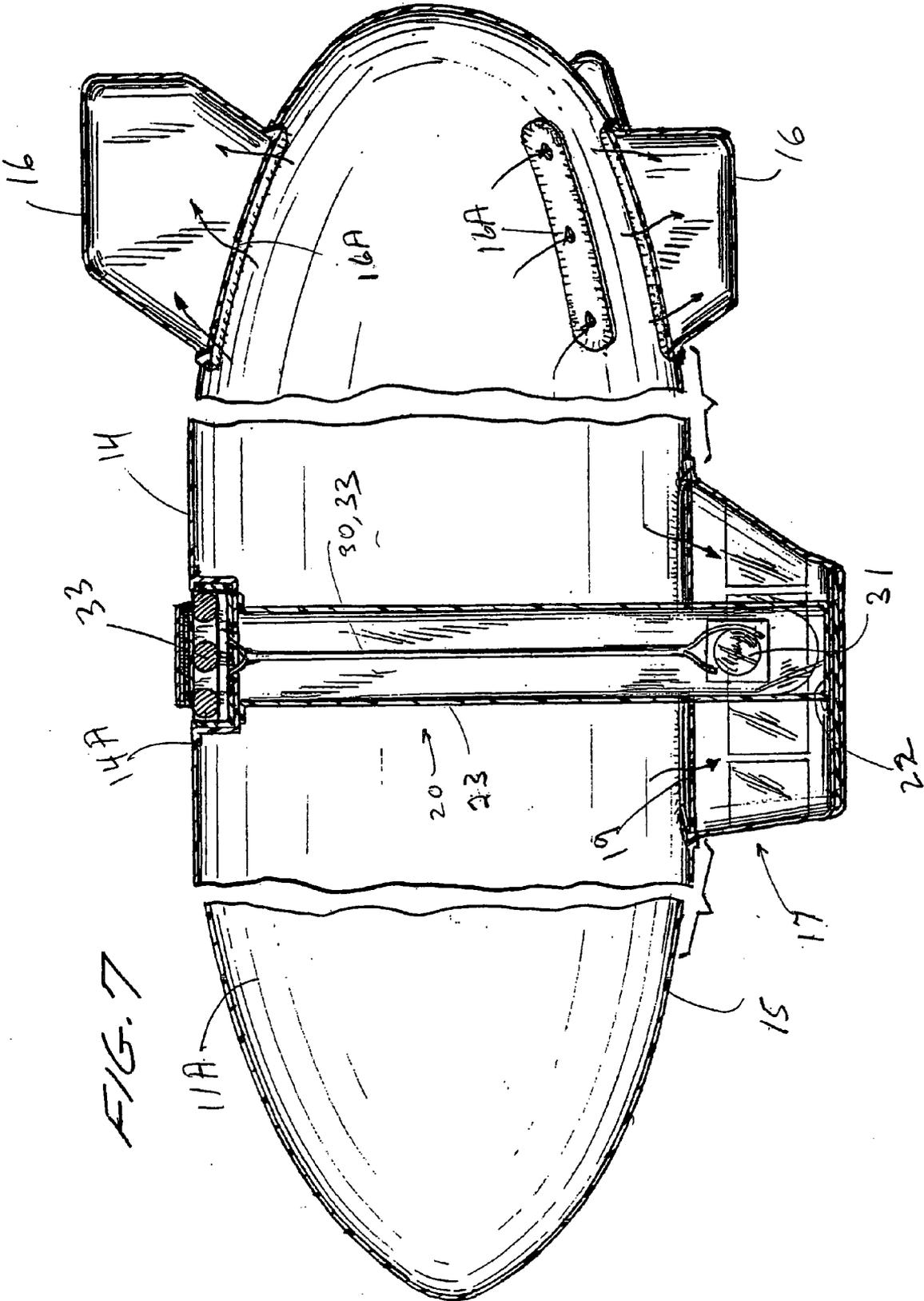


FIG. 1

FIG. 3





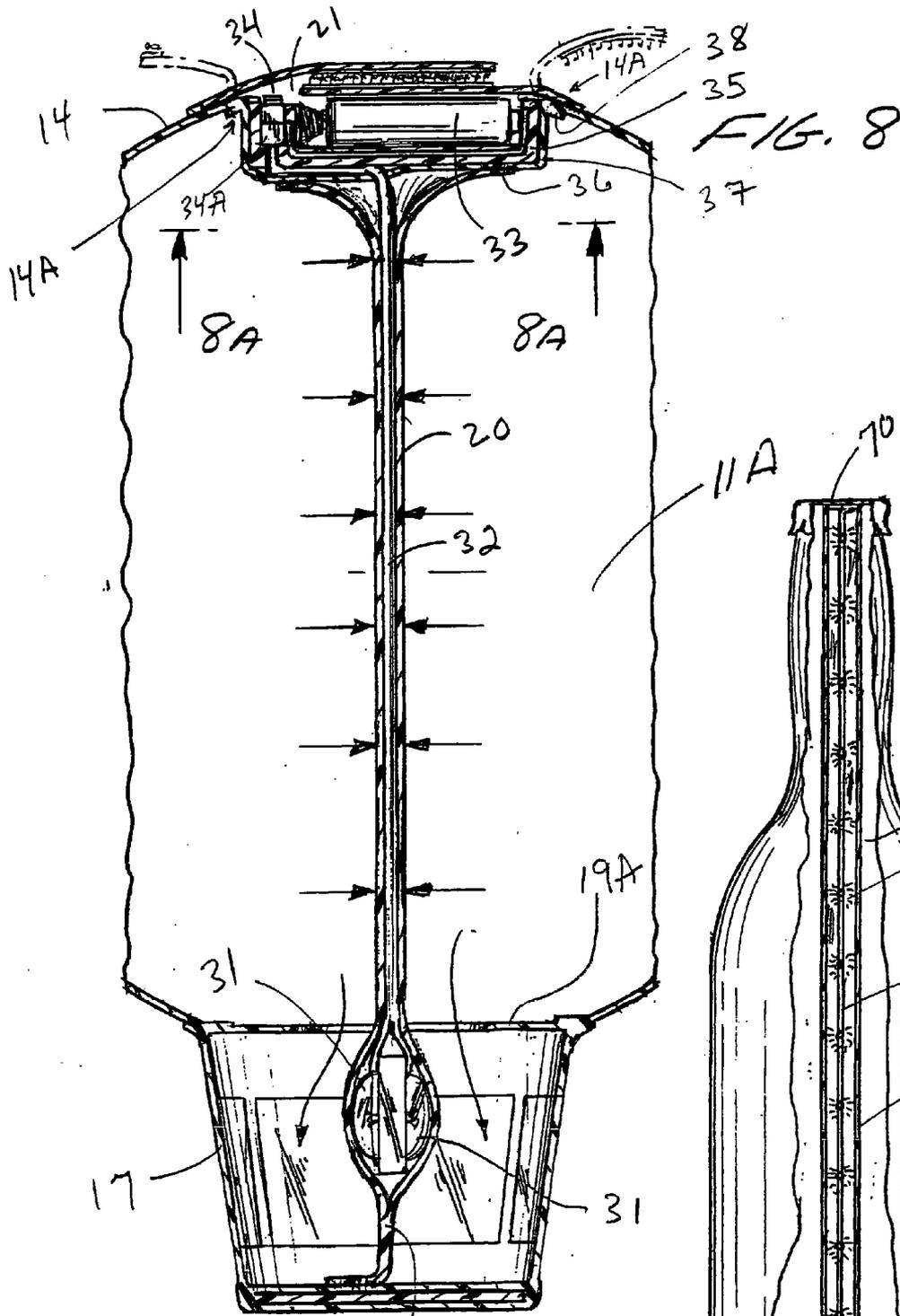


FIG. 8

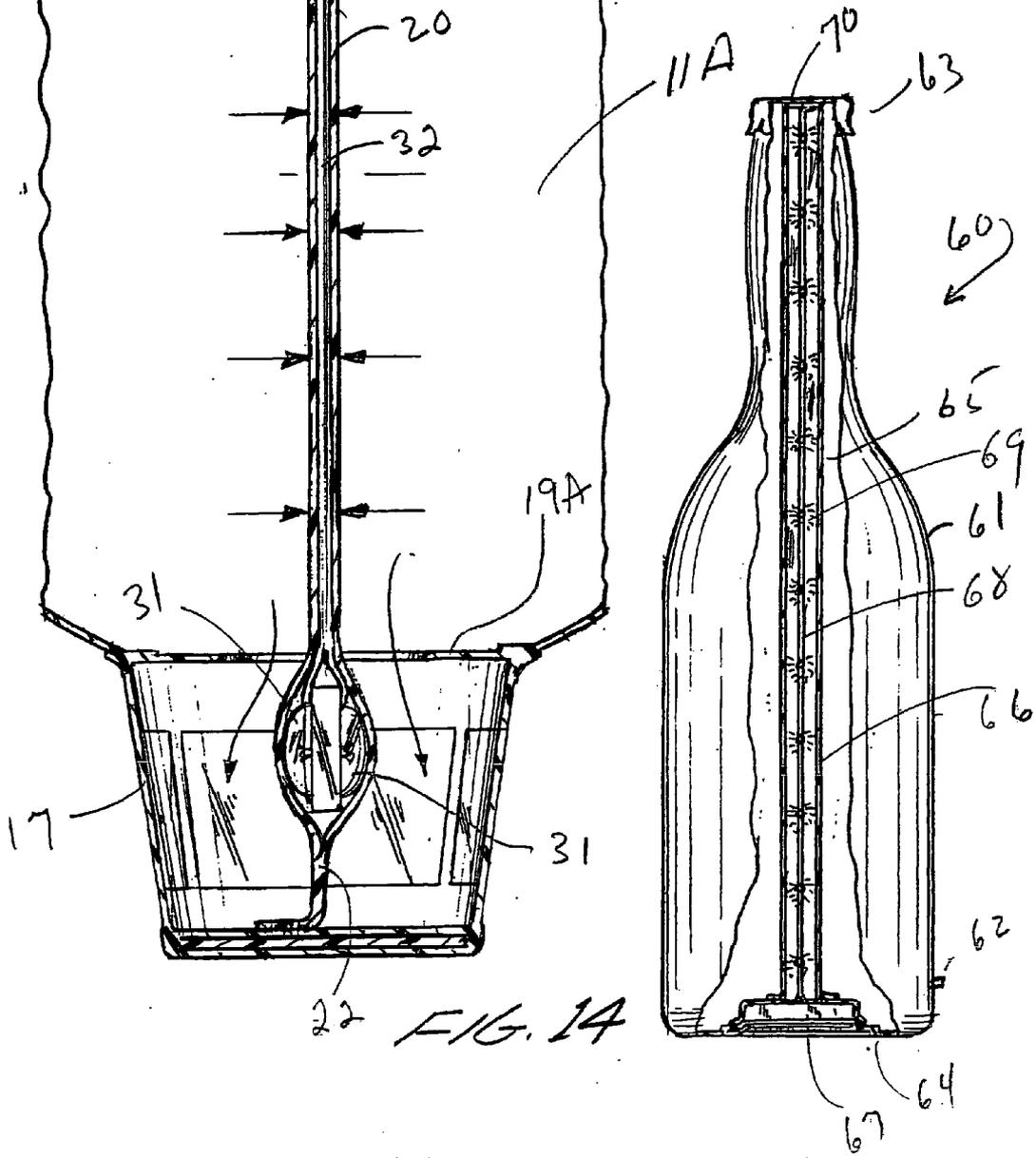
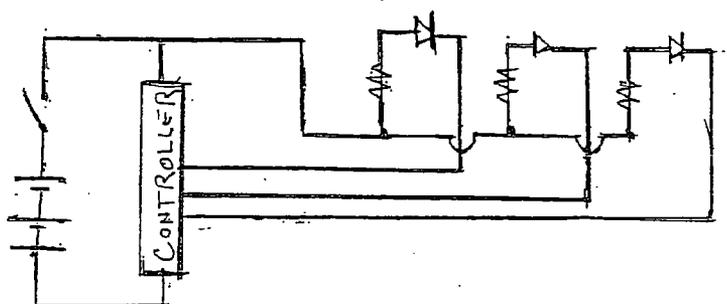
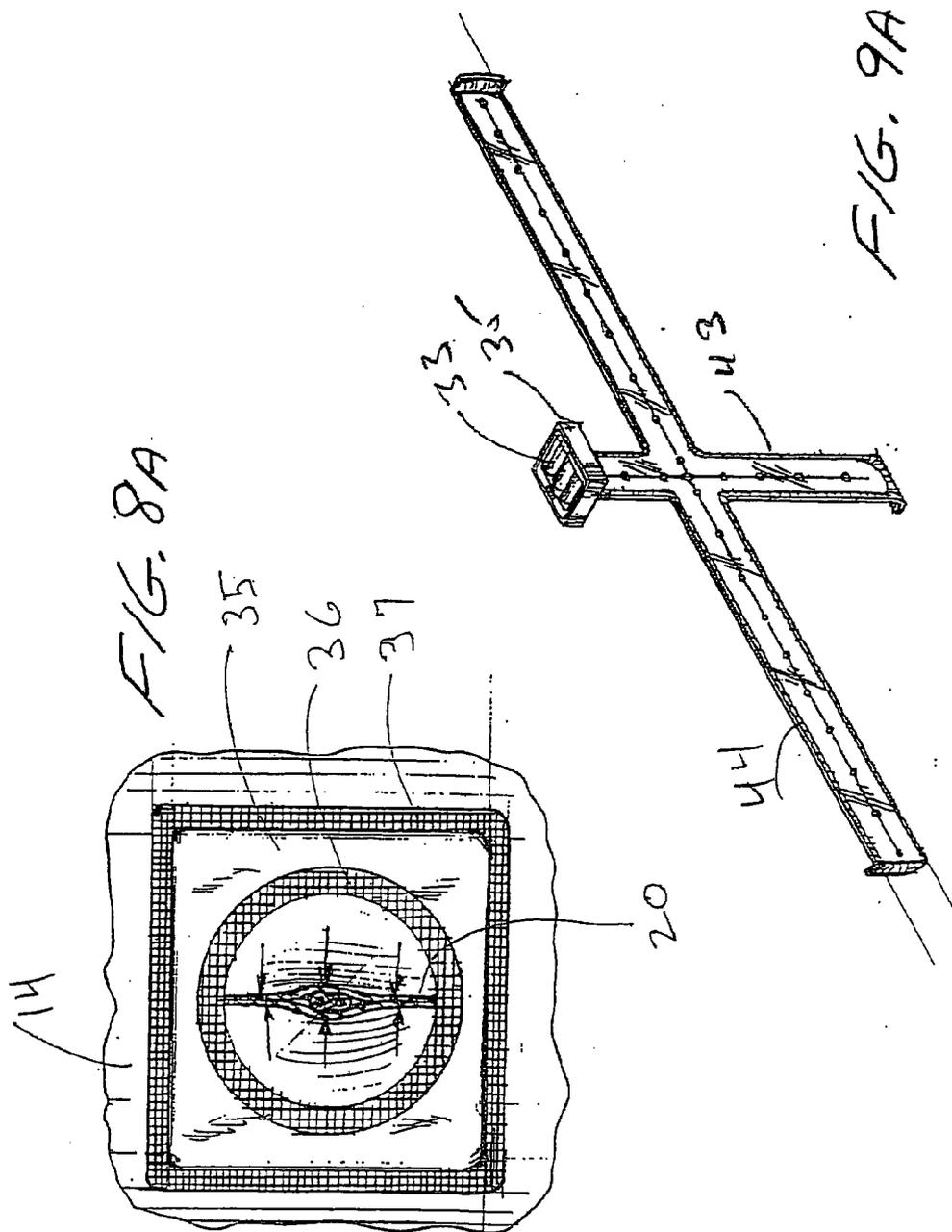
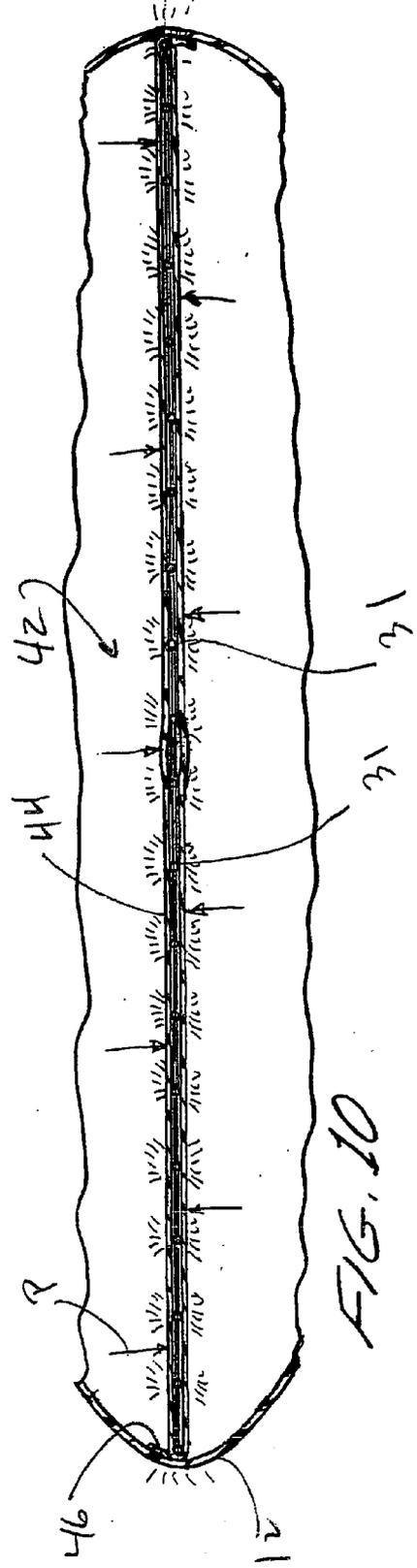
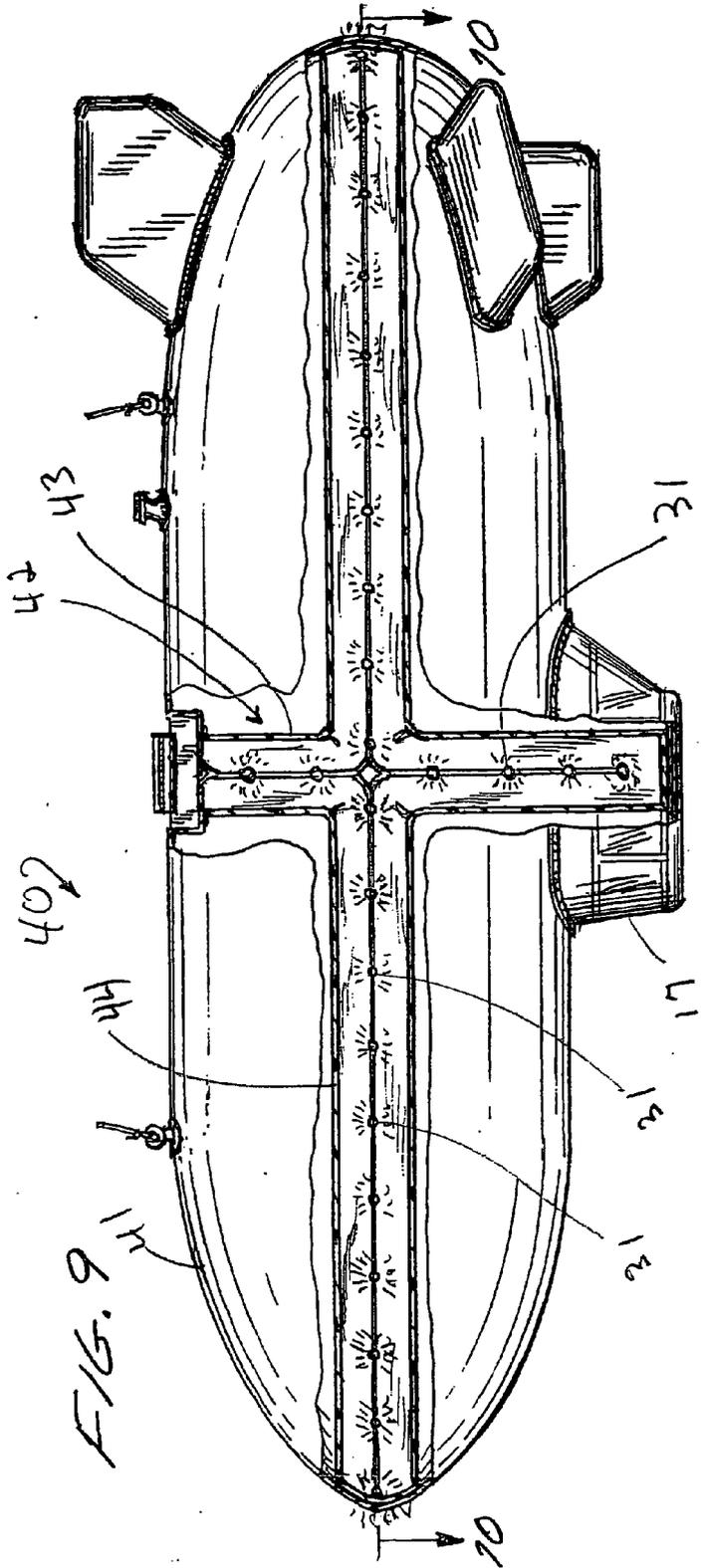
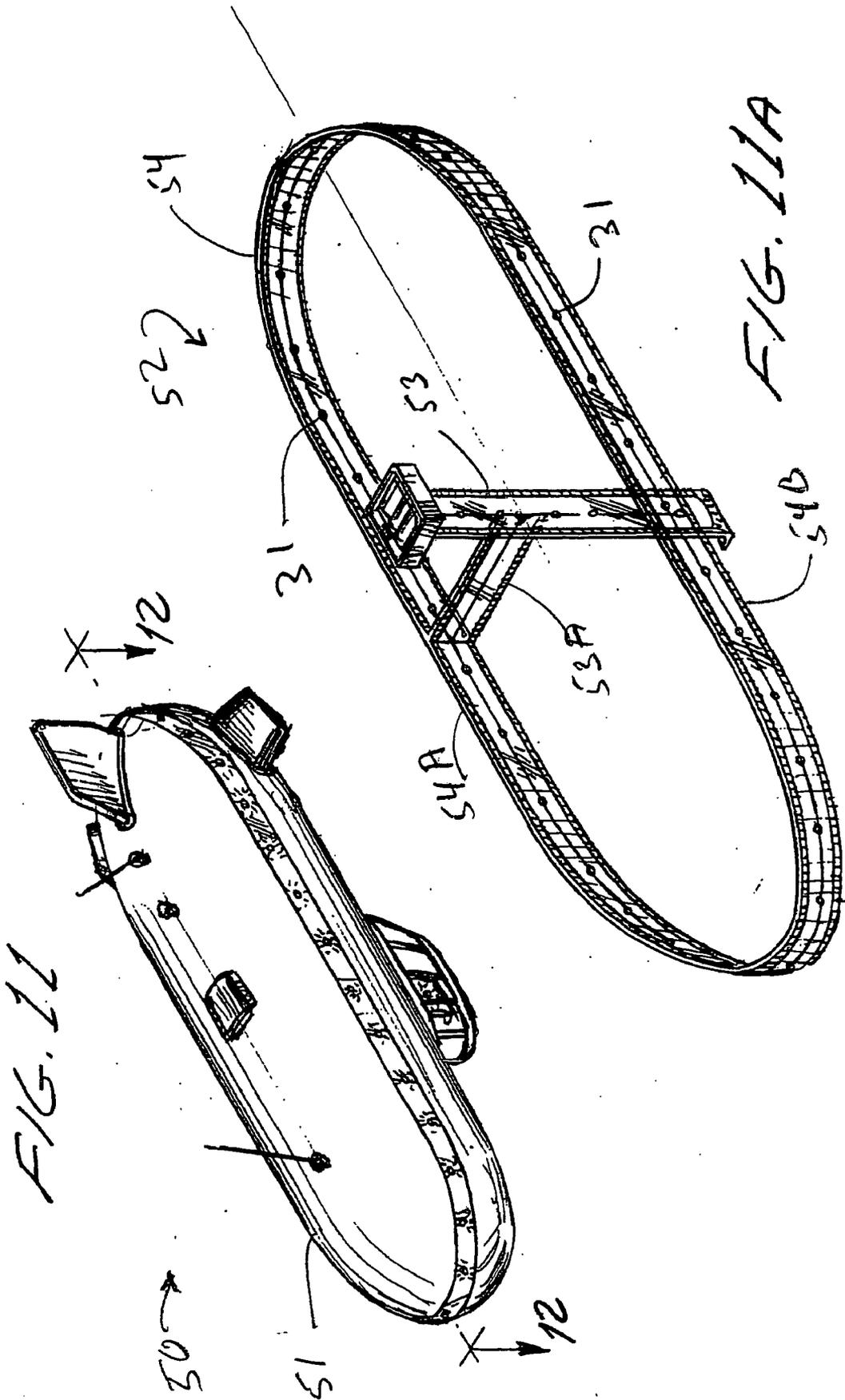


FIG. 14







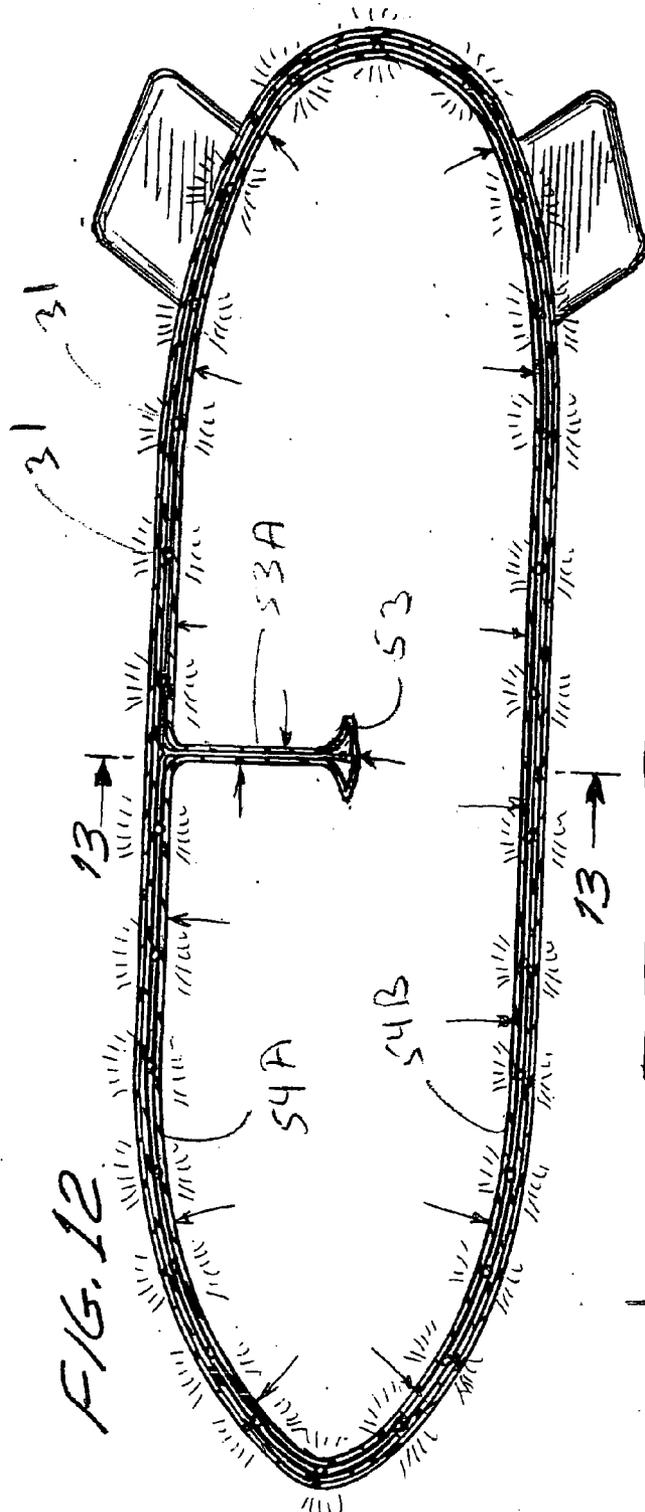


FIG. 12

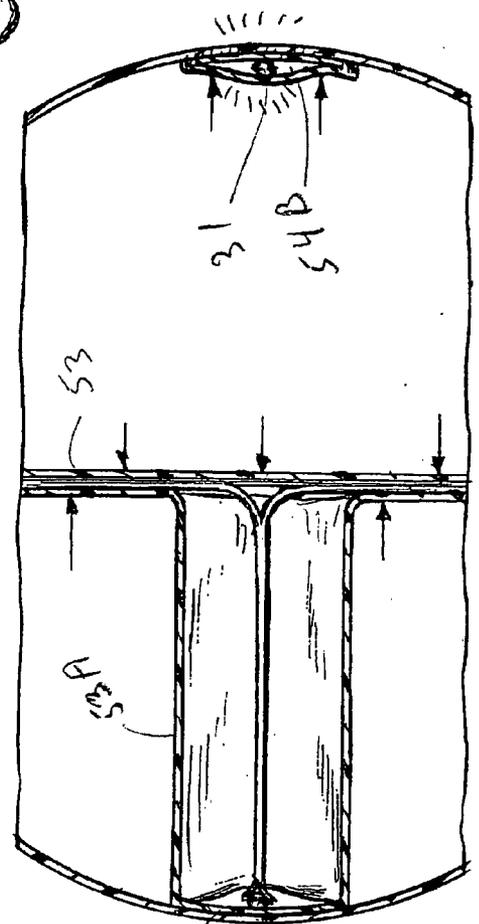


FIG. 13

INFLATABLE PLASTIC ARTICLES WITH SEALED INTERNAL ILLUMINATION

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application is based on U.S. Provisional Application Ser. No. 60/851,803 filed on Oct. 13, 2006 and claims priority benefit under 35 U.S.C. 120.

BACKGROUND

[0002] 1. Field of the Invention

[0003] This invention is in the field of inflatable articles formed of thin sheet plastic as replicas of real products such as blimps, automobiles, beer bottles, animals, humans, characters, lawn decorations and furniture.

[0004] 2. Prior Art

[0005] The prior art includes inflatable replicas both with and without internal or integrated electrical illumination. Inflatable replicas without illumination are exemplified by applicant's U.S. Pat. Nos. 5,512,002 and 6,659,837 for inflatable cars, U.S. Pat. No. 6,161,902 for an inflatable chair, and U.S. Pat. No. 6,322,107 for an inflatable polyhedron calendar. Inflatable replicas with internal illumination are exemplified by U.S. Pat. Nos. 5,609,411, and 2,936,366.

[0006] These inflatable replicas have great use as promotional and decorative items and as toys. Their size can range from moderate as seen in store promotions to huge as seen in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade floats. For a relatively small cost they can replicate extremely expensive products such as race cars, airplanes, famous buildings, etc.

[0007] When deflated such inflatable replicas can be stored and/or shipped in relatively small and light containers. They can be inflated and deflated relatively quickly and inexpensively, and new ones can be created in little time and low cost. Lastly, their appearance can be enhanced significantly with steady intermittent or flashing internal illumination.

[0008] In illuminated inflatable articles in the prior art, a significant problem is air leakage at the junction where electric wires from a stationary or battery powered source must intersect and pass through the plastic sheet to reach the electric light bulbs or other light medium situated within the inflatable replica. Efforts to prevent air leakage are often unreliable or temporary and invariably add substantial cost to an otherwise inexpensive product.

[0009] The present invention addresses and provides a solution to the air leakage problem and the substantial extra costs seen in prior art efforts to deal with air leakage.

OBJECTS AND SUMMARY OF THE NEW INVENTION

[0010] The present invention provides an inflatable replica which includes a novel construction to permit internal electrical illumination without the conventional risk of leakage and without the excessive cost to minimize risk of air leakage. The new inflatable product has: (a) a primary chamber of an interesting shape, such as a blimp, formed of a flexible thin plastic sheet, this product being sealed to contain a quantity of air, and (b) a secondary chamber within and sealed to the primary chamber, but independent of the inflation of the primary chamber. The secondary chamber contains an illumination sub-assembly including LEDs, wires and a battery pack. Because the secondary chamber

and its contents of LEDs, wires and battery are independent of the primary chamber, there is no need to have wires intersect any wall of the sheet material that defines the primary chamber, and thus the risk of leakage from such intersections is totally avoided, and the cost of trying to avoid such leakage is similarly avoided.

[0011] One preferred embodiment of this invention is a blimp replica; however, the concept is also easily applied to inflatable beer bottle replicas and many other inflatable articles. In the new blimp replica there is an inflatable main body or primary chamber having the blimp shape and a tubular secondary body that intersects one wall of the main body in an airtight intersection and extends as a pocket into the main body. Within the pocket is an illumination sub-assembly including one or more LEDs, control circuitry and a replaceable battery. While the pocket is open at one end to receive the battery and thus is open to the atmosphere, it is closed at the other end. The open end of the pocket is sealed around its edges to the wall of the main chamber so that there is no need to seal or attempt to seal the main chamber from air leakage about the wires situated within the pocket.

[0012] Because the inner chamber's cylindrical walls are inside the main body, pressure in the main body will push radially inward and collapse the inner chamber walls about the illumination means, which is not a problem, since such illumination means consists only of LEDs or light bulbs, wires, a control circuit device and a battery. Replacement of a battery may be done without deflating the main body, since the battery is contained in the inner tube which is independent of the main body. Stated differently, the main body when inflated defines within it a space occupied by air and by the inner chamber. The wires, LEDs and battery are within the inner chamber, but not in said air space of the main chamber. Thus, the wires do not intersect and pass through any wall defining the air space of said main chamber, and thus there can be no air leakage problem occurring due to an improper air seal about a wire.

[0013] In the blimp embodiment the main body includes at the bottom cabin or gondola extending below the basic oblong and cylindrical body chamber. When the present invention is applied to the blimp product, a tubular secondary chamber intersects the main chamber from top to bottom, with the top end of the tubular chamber open to the atmosphere and the bottom end of the tubular chamber situated in the gondola area at the bottom of and extending below the main chamber of the blimp. Within and at the bottom of the tubular chamber is an LED or other illumination means. Wires and other control circuit means for flashing or other lighting event control lay in the mid-section of the tubular chamber, and the battery lies at the top end of the tubular chamber. Thus illumination sub-assembly components within the tubular chamber are also within the main body but are isolated from and independent of inflation of the main body.

[0014] With this type of construction an inflatable replica can include an illumination means such as flashing LEDs with a hidden battery and circuit means, which is situated within the pocket that extends into a main body. The pocket flanges are heat sealed to the main body, so there is no need to seal around the wires within the pocket.

[0015] The intersecting inner tube can be easily and inexpensively incorporated into the blimp or other structure by conventional heat sealing techniques. The inflatable product is made of conventional heat-sealable plastic sheet such as

PVC. The illumination means may be selected from conventional flashing or steady light systems with a battery power supply, an on/off switch and known control circuit means.

[0016] It is thus an object of this invention to provide an inflatable replica made of thin flexible plastic sheet that defines a main inflatable chamber and a secondary or inner chamber at least partially within the main chamber and adapted to contain illumination means, wires for powering same and a replaceable battery, where the main body is sealed without any need to create a seal about wired that enter the main body. While the main chamber may have a variety of external extensions, as for legs of a defined replica, and may have other internal parts, the wiring does not penetrate any sheet material that constitutes the sealed main chamber.

[0017] A further object of this invention is to provide an inflatable replica having internal electrical illumination means which is safe from air leakage and is relatively easy and economical to design and manufacture.

[0018] A still further object of this invention is to provide an inflatable replica having within the main chamber, a secondary or inner chamber at least partially within the primary chamber, where the inner chamber contains illumination means and is open to the atmosphere.

[0019] The objects described above and others will be demonstrated more clearly by the drawings presented below and by the detailed descriptions of these drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0020] FIG. 1 is a top plan view of a first embodiment of my new invention in the form of an inflatable blimp replica,

[0021] FIG. 2 is side elevational view of the blimp replica of FIG. 1,

[0022] FIG. 3 is a sectional view in section taken along line 3-3 in FIG. 1, with the illumination subassembly omitted,

[0023] FIG. 4 is a top perspective view of the illumination subassembly,

[0024] FIG. 5 is a sectional view taken along line 5-5 in FIG. 4 with the inner chamber's tubular walls shown collapsed inwardly due to the air pressure in the main chamber of the blimp replica,

[0025] FIG. 6 is a sectional view taken along line 6-6 in FIG. 4 showing an LED of the illumination assembly,

[0026] FIG. 7 is a sectional view taken along line 7-7 in FIG. 1,

[0027] FIG. 8 is a sectional view taken along line 8-8 in FIG. 2,

[0028] FIG. 8A is a sectional view taken along line 8A-8A in FIG. 8,

[0029] FIG. 9 is a side elevation view similar to FIG. 2 but partially in section, showing a second embodiment of my invention, showing LEDs strung from top-to-bottom and from end-to-end of the blimp replica,

[0030] FIG. 9A is a perspective view of the inner chamber containing the LEDs where the main chamber of the blimp of FIG. 9,

[0031] FIG. 10 is a sectional view taken along line 10-10 in FIG. 9,

[0032] FIG. 11 is a perspective view of a third embodiment of an inflatable blimp showing LEDs strung from end-to-end along both sides of the blimp replica,

[0033] FIG. 11A is a perspective view of the inner chamber containing LEDs within the main chamber of the blimp of FIG. 11,

[0034] FIG. 12 is a sectional view taken along line 12-12 in FIG. 11,

[0035] FIG. 13 is a sectional view taken along line 13-13 in FIG. 12,

[0036] FIG. 14 is a side elevation view partially in section of a fourth embodiment of my invention in the form of an inflatable beer bottle replica, with LEDs strung from top-to-bottom and a battery at the bottom, and

[0037] FIG. 15 is a representative electrical circuit for any of the embodiments above.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0038] For convenience and clarity in describing these embodiments, similar elements or components appearing in different figures will have the same reference numbers.

[0039] FIGS. 1-8 illustrate a first embodiment of my new invention, FIGS. 9-10 illustrate a second embodiment, FIGS. 11-13 illustrate a third embodiment, and FIG. 14 illustrates a fourth embodiment.

[0040] For the first embodiment FIGS. 1-3 show the new inflatable blimp replica 10 comprising the main body 11 defining within it a first or main inflatable chamber 11A with its opposite nose and tail ends 12, 13, top and bottom walls 14, 15, fins 16 and gondola or cabin 17 at the bottom. This gondola replicates a cabin and control center for the pilot, crew and passengers. As shown here this cabin has windows all around and at least one light in or near the cabin.

[0041] This blimp is formed of a thin, flexible, air-impervious heat-sealable plastic sheet such as polyvinylchloride ("PVC") formed into said airtight main body 11 with valve 18 for inflating and deflating this body. The space 17A within gondola 17 is in communication with chamber 11A via aperture 19, seen in FIGS. 7 and 8, so that inflation of main body 11 automatically inflates gondola 17. Fins 16 are also in communication with chamber 11A via apertures 16A, as seen in FIG. 7, so that the fins also inflate automatically with main chamber 11A. Conventional plastic sheet material includes polyvinyl chlorides, polyolefins and polyesters having thickness in the range of 20 mm to 50 mm.

[0042] As seen in FIGS. 2 and 4-8, there is a second tubular body 20 having an open top end 21, closed bottom end 22 and central part 23 and within body 20 is inner chamber 20A. Tubular body 20 is formed of thin, flexible, heat sealable plastic sheet similar to that of main body 11. As described later, tubular body 20 is transparent or translucent at least in areas where it houses illuminating LEDs.

[0043] Bottom end 22 of tube 20 extends into the space 17A defined by gondola 17 and is secured to the bottom of the gondola 17 by a heat seal 22A. Top end 21 of chamber 20 included battery box 35 and intersects top wall 14 of the blimp's main or first chamber 12, as seen in FIGS. 2, 7 and 8. This intersection 14A includes a heat seal junction, leaving the interior of inner chamber 20 open at the top to the atmosphere, even though the main body 11 is sealed all around the top opening of tube 20 and sealed everywhere else so that main body 11 can be inflated.

[0044] Thus, tube 20 is a second chamber or pocket situated within main chamber 11A of main body 11. As seen in FIGS. 4, 8 and 8A inner tube 20 is generally flat like an envelope along its main length which houses wires 32. Tube

20 at the top end flares open as edge or flange 36 (see FIGS. 8 and 8A) whose edges are heat sealed to a box-like pocket 37 which receives and holds battery box 35. The top edges of pocket 37 flare out as flange 38 that is heat sealed at 14A to top wall 14 of main body 11. Tube 20, pocket 37 and main body 11 are all made of generally similar thin heat sealable plastic sheet. Pocket 37 and tube 20 may separate elements joined together, or may be a single molded element. Pocket 37, while it contains battery box 35, is open at its bottom so that wires 33 from the batteries can extend downward through tube 20 to the LEDs at the bottom of tube 20 to the LEDs at the closed bottom of tube 20. The heat sealed junction 14A allows tube 20 and the illumination subassembly 30, including wires 32 within tube 20, to extend through top wall 14 without any need to create an air seal directly around or along the wires. Main body 11 is inflatable and air tight when inflated and sealed by valve 18, regardless of the fact that tube 20 is always open at its top end 21 to the atmosphere. Accordingly, space 20A within tubular chamber 20 can contain all necessary illumination components, as described below, without having any electrical wires intersect and pass through a wall defining and sealing main chamber 11A.

[0045] Illumination subassembly 30 within tubular chamber 20 specifically includes one or more light emitting diodes (LEDs) 31, electric wires 32, batteries 33 within battery box 35 and an on/off switch 34, and may include additional circuit control components 34A such as a timer for flashing the LEDs or illuminating them in predetermined sequences or otherwise varying the illumination. A circuit diagram for a typical electrical circuit as used in this invention is shown in FIG. 15, but many other circuits are possible.

[0046] In further embodiments there are a plurality of LEDs within gondola 17, or LEDs may be positioned along the length of chamber 20 extending from end to rear end or top-to-bottom, or elsewhere as later described, and appropriate wiring and electrical or electronic circuitry and components are provided. In this first embodiment the LEDs are standard commercially available products, and the battery box 35 includes three standard 1½ volt batteries 33 in series. As alternatives to LEDs, incandescent light bulbs may be used. Circuit control means may be well-known stock items readily available from standard commercial sources. Obviously, the batteries 33 can be replaced with an appropriate circuit and wiring means to power illumination subassembly 30 from a standard 120 volt power source.

[0047] FIGS. 9, 9A and 10 illustrate a further embodiment 40 of an illuminated inflatable blimp. Here, inner chamber 42 contains the illumination sub-assembly formed generally in a cross-shape, see FIG. 9A, with vertical portion 43 extending from top to bottom as before, and horizontal portion 44 extending from front end 12 to rear end 13 of the blimp, and with LEDs 31 distributed along the length of the vertical and horizontal portions.

[0048] The many possible variations of illumination sequencing, include simple flashing on-and-off of all the LEDs, to turning the LEDs on sequentially from front to rear or random sequences, etc.

[0049] As with the embodiment of FIGS. 1-8, inner tubular chamber 42 of blimp 40 in FIG. 9 of cross-shape is open to the atmosphere at its top end 45, and its walls will generally collapse inwardly from air pressure indicated by arrows P in the main chamber when it is inflated. The front

end 44A of chamber part 44 is heat sealed at 46 to front end 12 of main body 12 to stabilize the position of part 44 within body 12.

[0050] The LEDs 31 distributed along inner tube parts 44 and 43 in the blimp embodiment of FIG. 9 are visible because of a strip of transparent or translucent plastic extending along side of body 41. The remainder of main body 41 above and below the light transmitting strip is generally opaque to hide the inner construction and to provide a base on which to print promotional or other graphics.

[0051] FIGS. 11, 11A, 12 and 13 illustrate a third embodiment 50 of an illuminated inflatable blimp with the inner chamber 52 formed as a vertical part 53 similar to vertical part 42 in the FIG. 9 embodiment, but with the front-to-rear part formed as an elongated bow 54 comprising left and right parts 54A, 54B, that extends along both sides of blimp 50 and connect to vertical part 53 by leg 53A. LEDs 31 are spaced along bow parts 54A, 54B. Other LEDs are also situated at the bottom of vertical part 53 in or near the gondola. As seen in FIG. 11A, the top and bottom parts of inner tube 52 are generally similar to the top and bottom parts of inner tube 20 in FIGS. 8 and 8A. The opposite front and rear ends of bow 52 are secured to the front and rear ends of main body and selectively along the sides to stabilize the portion of bow 52 along the transparent or translucent strip on the sides of main body 51.

[0052] FIG. 14 illustrates a fourth embodiment 60 in the form of an inflatable replica beer bottle or liquor bottle. As with the earlier described embodiments, this invention provides a structure that allows electrical wires and LEDs to be placed within an inflatable body, while eliminating the risk of air leakage where such wires enter the internal space of the main body. This embodiment includes main body 61, valve 62, top and bottom areas 63, 64 of body 61, and internal illumination sub-assembly 65. As evident, sub-assembly 65 is an upside down version of the illumination sub-assembly seen in FIG. 4. Accordingly, in the FIG. 4 version there is inner tubular chamber 66 which contains battery pack 67, wires 68, and LEDs 69. The top end 70 of tube 66 is fixed to the top end 63 of main body 61.

[0053] While the invention has been described in conjunction with several embodiments, it is to be understood that many alternatives, modifications and variations will be apparent to those skilled in the art in light of the foregoing description. Accordingly, this invention is intended to embrace all such alternatives, modifications, and variations and different shaped inflatable and illuminated articles, which fall within the spirit and scope of the appended claims.

1. An inflatable blimp replica formed of thin plastic sheet and operable with an electric battery, comprising:

- a. an inflatable main chamber having top and bottom walls and side walls which define the perimeter of the air space within said main chamber, valve means in one of said walls for inflating and deflating said main chamber, and a gondola extending downward from said bottom wall,
- b. an inner chamber having a central part, an open top part and a closed bottom part, wherein said top part intersects and is heat sealed in an air tight manner to said top wall, said central part extends downward through said main body, and said bottom part extends into said gondola, such that said main chamber can be closed and

inflatable notwithstanding the intersection of said inner chamber through said top wall, said inner chamber's top end being open to the atmosphere, and

- c. an illumination sub-assembly within said inner chamber, comprising:
 - i. at least one LED in said bottom part of said inner chamber,
 - ii. means at said top part for receiving and holding said electric battery,
 - iii. electrical conductor wires extending through said inner chamber and interconnecting said battery and said LED, and
 - iv. control means for controlling when at least one said LED is switched on and off,

said electrical wires which interconnect said battery and said LED being within said inner chamber but outside said air space within said main chamber, and said gondola having at least one wall area that is transparent or translucent and through which light from said at least one LED, when it is turned on, is visible.

2. An inflatable blimp replica according to claim 1, wherein said transparent or translucent wall areas comprises windows.

3. An inflatable blimp replica according to claim 1, wherein said control means of said illumination circuit further comprises an on-and-off switch.

4. An inflatable blimp replica according to claim 3 wherein said control means further comprises means for turning said switch on and off at predetermined intervals of time.

5. An inflatable blimp replica according to claim 4, where said predetermined intervals correspond to turning LEDs on and then off according to a predetermined sequence.

6. An inflatable blimp replica according to claim 1, wherein said second chamber further comprises a secondary tubular part extending laterally from and being in communication with said central part, toward at least one of said ends of said main chamber.

said illumination means further comprises additional wires extending from said central part of said inner chamber through said secondary tubular part and additional LEDs connected along the length of said additional wires, whereby LEDs are situated in said gondola and along the length of said main chamber but within said inner chamber, said control means being adapted to control all the LEDs in said circuit, said main chamber having selected wall areas that are transparent or translucent and through which light from said LEDs, when they are turned on, is visible.

7. An inflatable blimp replica according to claim 1, wherein said inner chamber further comprises tubular segments extending in a rear-to-front mode along the side walls of said main chamber, and said illumination means further comprises additional LEDs and wires connecting said additional LEDs to said battery and control means, said main chamber having selected wall areas that are transparent or translucent and through which light from said LEDs, when they are turned on, is visible.

8. An inflatable blimp replica according to claim 6, wherein said tubular segments define a single continuous air passage within said inner chamber.

9. An inflatable blimp replica according to claim 6, wherein said secondary tubular part of said inner chamber extends to and is secured to said front end of said main chamber.

10. An inflatable blimp replica according to claim 1, wherein said illumination means further comprises a plurality of LEDs situated in said bottom end of said inner chamber and within said gondola, and said gondola having at least one wall area that is transparent or translucent and through which light from said at least one LED, when it is turned on, is visible.

11. An inflatable article formed of thin plastic sheet and operable with an electric battery, comprising:

- a. an inflatable main chamber having top, bottom and side walls which define the perimeter of the air space within said main chamber, valve means in one of said walls for inflating and deflating said main chamber,
- b. an inner chamber having a central part, an open top part and a closed bottom part, wherein said top part intersects and is heat sealed in an air tight manner to said top wall, said central part extends downward into said main body, such that said main chamber can be closed and inflatable notwithstanding the intersection of said inner chamber through said top wall, said chamber's top end being open to the atmosphere, and
- c. an illumination circuit within said inner chamber, comprising:
 - i. at least one LED in said bottom part of said inner chamber,
 - ii. means at said top end for receiving and holding said battery,
 - iii. electrical conductor wires extending through said inner chamber and interconnecting said battery and said LED, and
 - iv. control means for controlling when said at least one LED circuit is switched on and off,
- d. said electrical wires which interconnect said battery and said LED being within said inner chamber but outside said air space within said main chamber, and said gondola having at least one wall area that is transparent or translucent and through which light from said at least one LED, when it is turned on, is visible.

12. An inflatable article formed of thin plastic sheet and operable with an electric battery, comprising:

- a. an inflatable main chamber having top and bottom walls and side walls which define the perimeter of the air space within said main chamber, and valve means in one of said walls for inflating and deflating said main chamber,
- b. an inner chamber having a central part, an open top part and a closed bottom part, wherein said top part intersects and is heat sealed in an air tight manner to said bottom wall, said central part extends upward through said main body, such that said main chamber can be closed and inflatable notwithstanding the intersection of said inner chamber through said bottom wall, said inner chamber's bottom end being open to the atmosphere, and
- c. an illumination sub-assembly within said inner chamber, comprising:
 - i. at least one LED in said top part of said inner chamber,
 - ii. means at said bottom part for receiving and holding said battery,

- iii. electrical conductor wires extending through said inner chamber and interconnecting said battery and said LED, and
 - iv. control means for controlling when at least one said LED is switched on and off,
- said electrical wires which interconnect said battery and said LED being within said inner chamber but outside said air space within said main chamber, and said gondola having at least one wall area that is transparent or translucent and through which light from said at least one LED, when it is turned on, is visible.
- 13.** An inflatable blimp replica formed of thin plastic sheet, comprising:
- a. an inflatable main chamber having top and bottom walls and side walls which define the perimeter of the air space within said main chamber, valve means in one of said walls for inflating and deflating said main chamber, and a gondola extending downward from said bottom wall,
 - b. an inner chamber having a central part, an open top part and a closed bottom part, wherein said top part intersects and is heat sealed in an air tight manner to said top wall, said central part extends downward through said main body, and said bottom part extends into said

- gondola, such that said main chamber can be closed and inflatable notwithstanding the intersection of said inner chamber through said top wall, said inner chamber's top end being open to the atmosphere, and
 - c. an illumination sub-assembly within said inner chamber, comprising:
 - i. at least one LED in said bottom part of said inner chamber,
 - ii. an electric battery,
 - iii. means at said top part for receiving and holding said electric battery,
 - iv. electrical conductor wires extending through said inner chamber and interconnecting said battery and said LED, and
 - v. control means for controlling when at least one said LED is switched on and off,
- said electrical wires which interconnect said battery and said LED being within said inner chamber but outside said air space within said main chamber, and said gondola having at least one wall area that is transparent or translucent and through which light from said at least one LED, when it is turned on, is visible.

* * * * *