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(54) **WIRELESS, FREQUENCY-AGILE SPREAD SPECTRUM GROUND LINK-BASED AIRCRAFT DATA COMMUNICATION SYSTEM**

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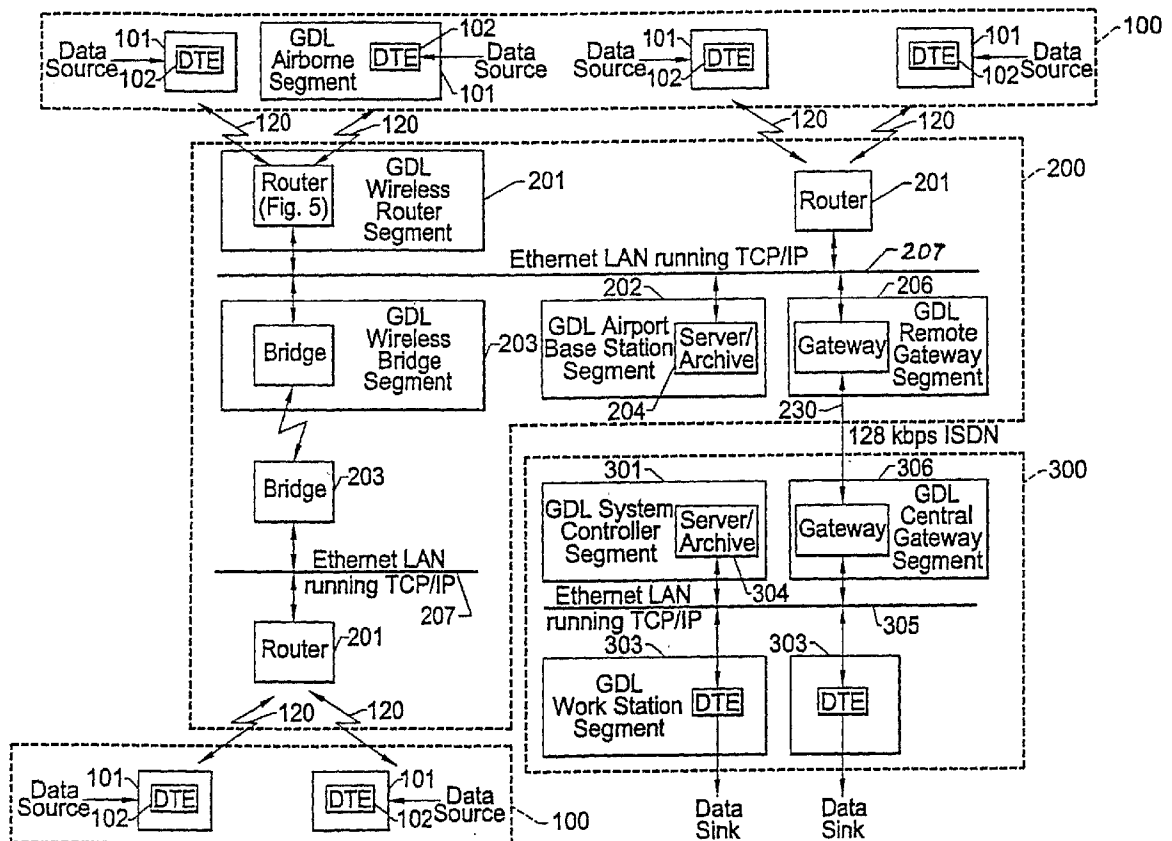
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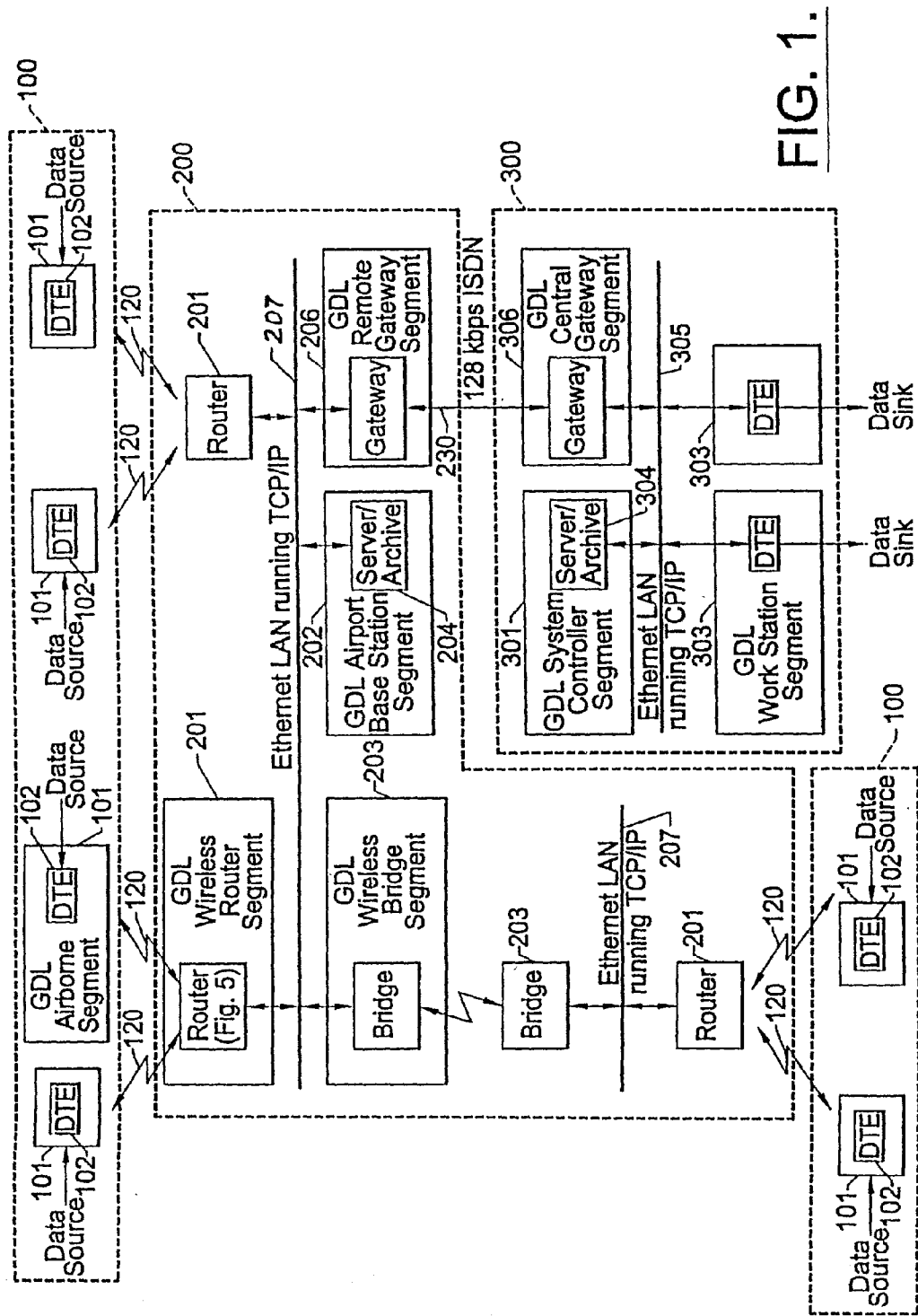
Related U.S. Application Data

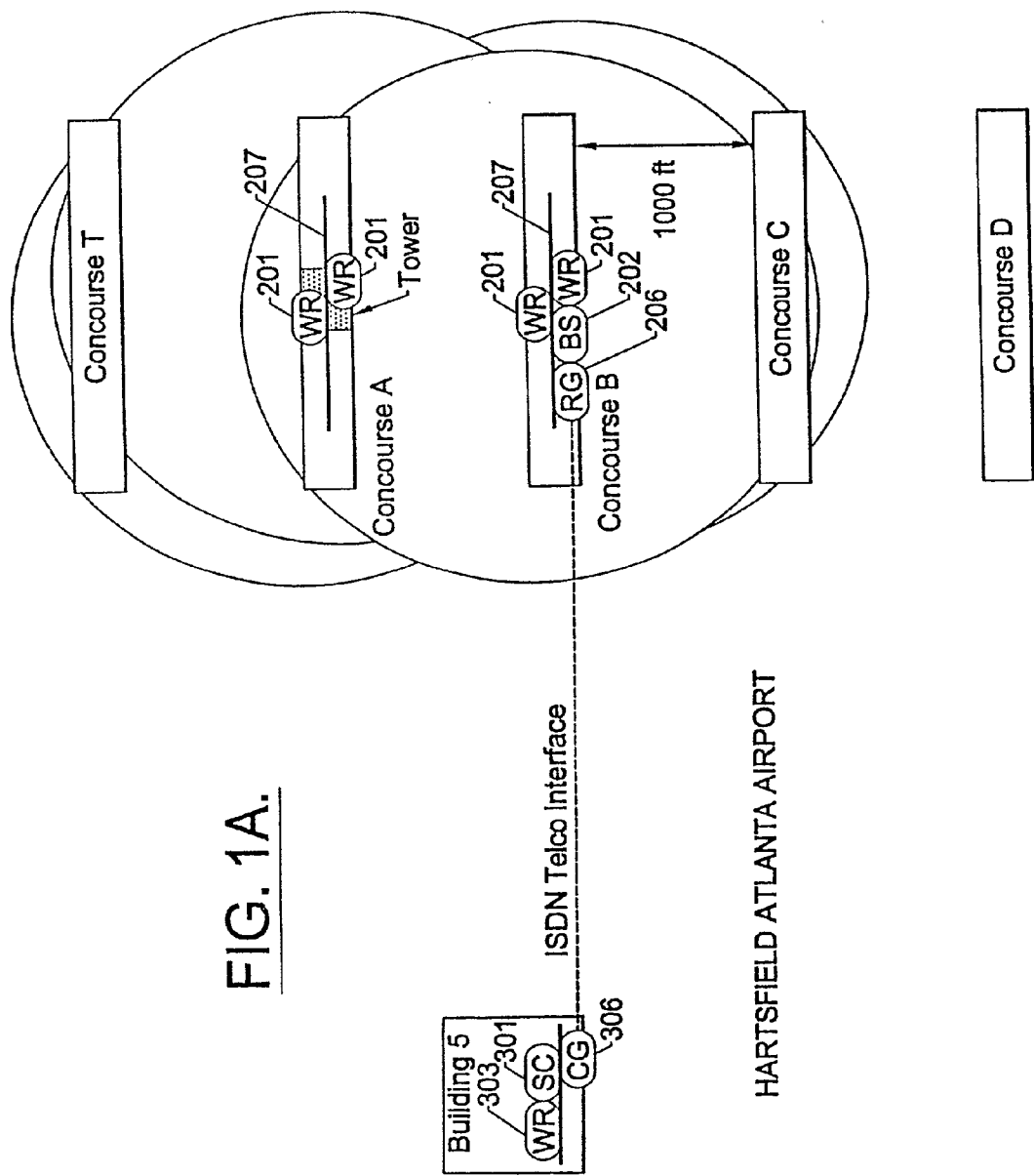
(63) Continuation of application No. 09/714,583, filed on Nov. 16, 2000, which is a continuation of application

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A flight information communication system has a plurality of RF direct sequence spread spectrum ground data links that link respective aircraft-resident subsystems, in each of which a copy of its flight performance data is stored, with airport-located subsystems. The airport-located subsystems are coupled by way communication paths, such as land line telephone links, to a remote flight operations control center. At the flight operations control center, flight performance data downlinked from plural aircraft parked at different airports is analyzed. In addition, the flight control center may be employed to direct the uploading of in-flight data files, such as audio, video and navigation files from the airport-located subsystems to the aircraft.







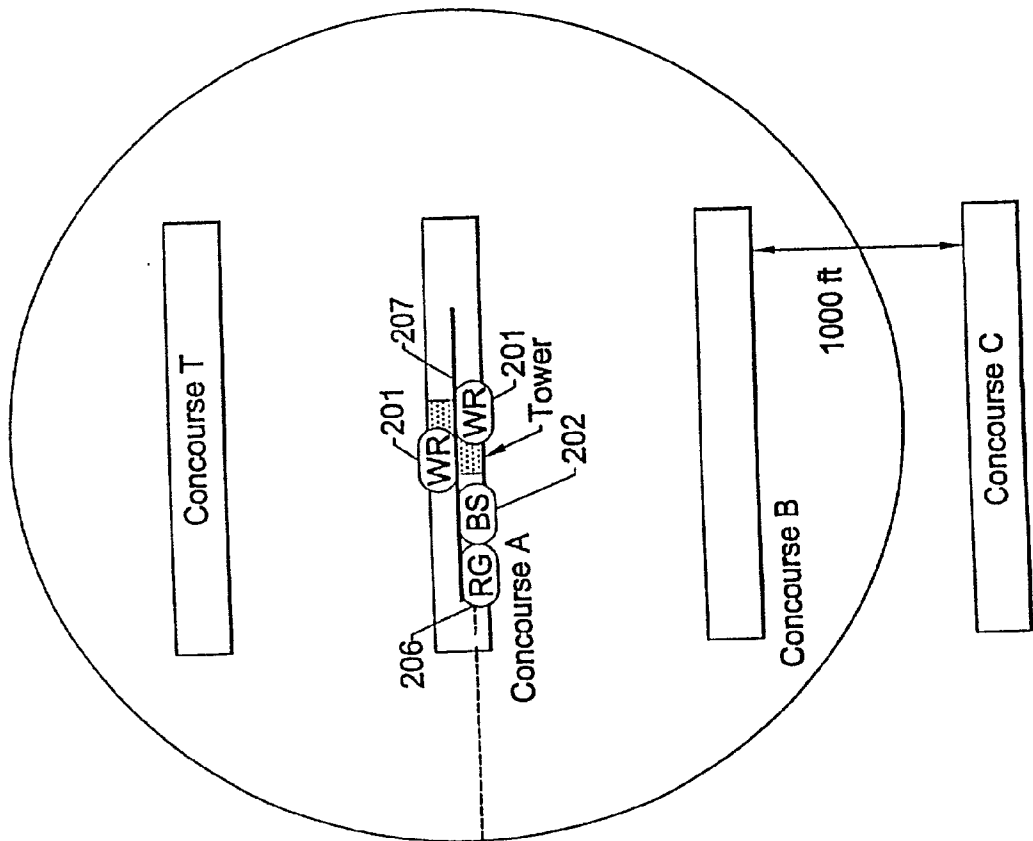


FIG. 1B.
HARTSFIELD ATLANTA AIRPORT

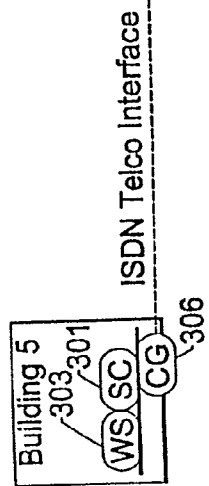
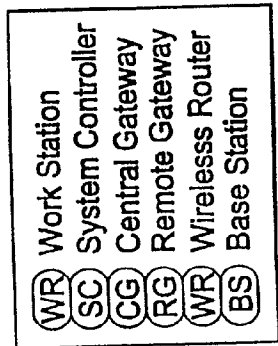


FIG. 1C.



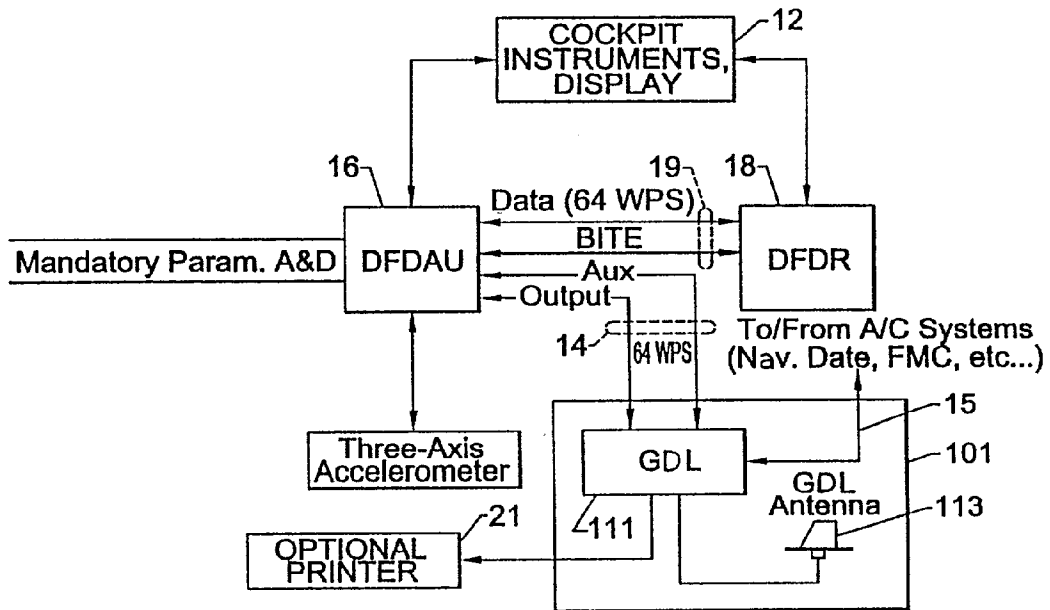


FIG. 2.

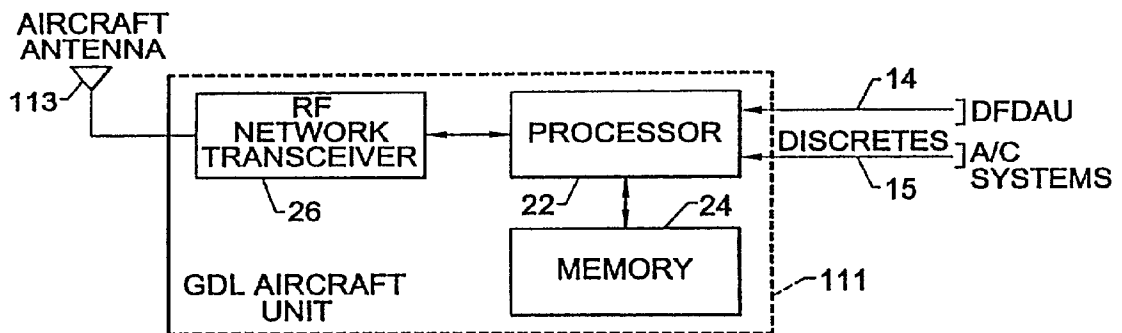


FIG. 3.

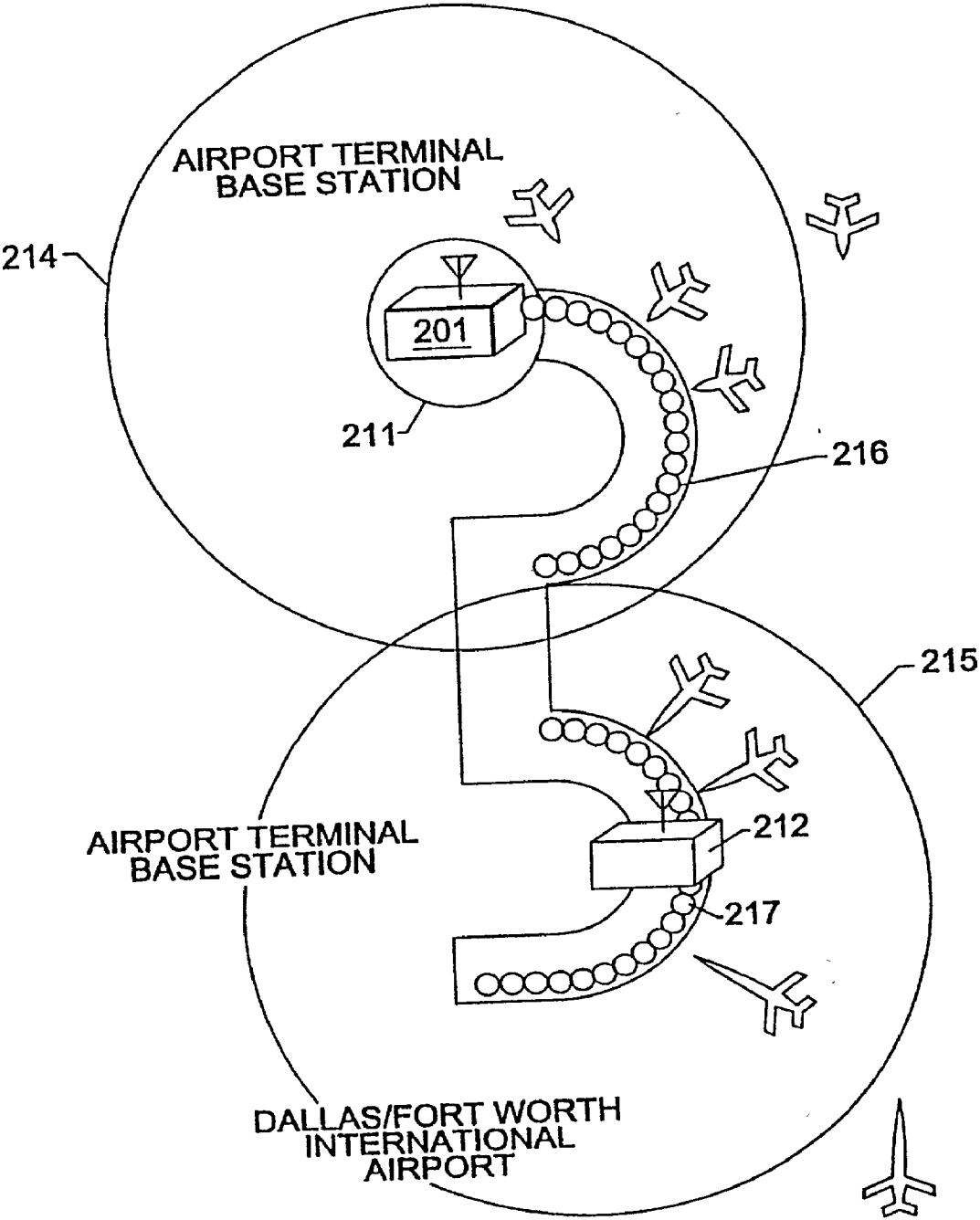


FIG. 4.

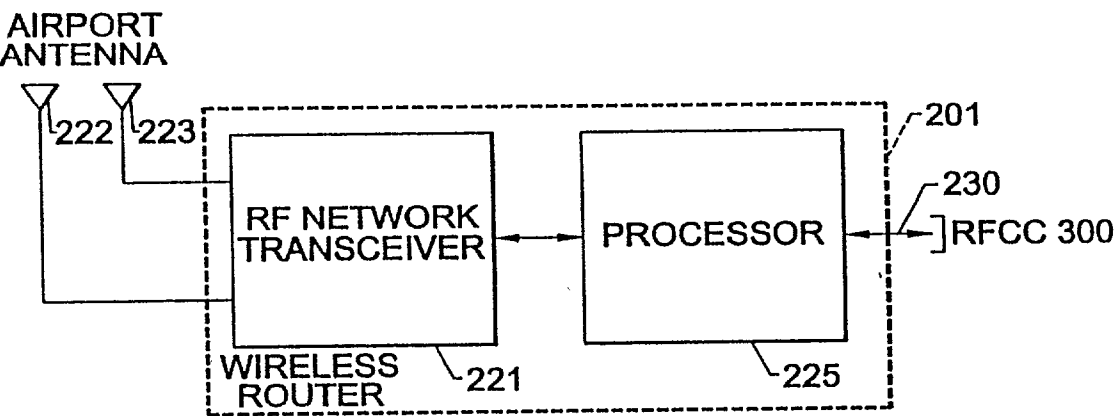


FIG. 5.

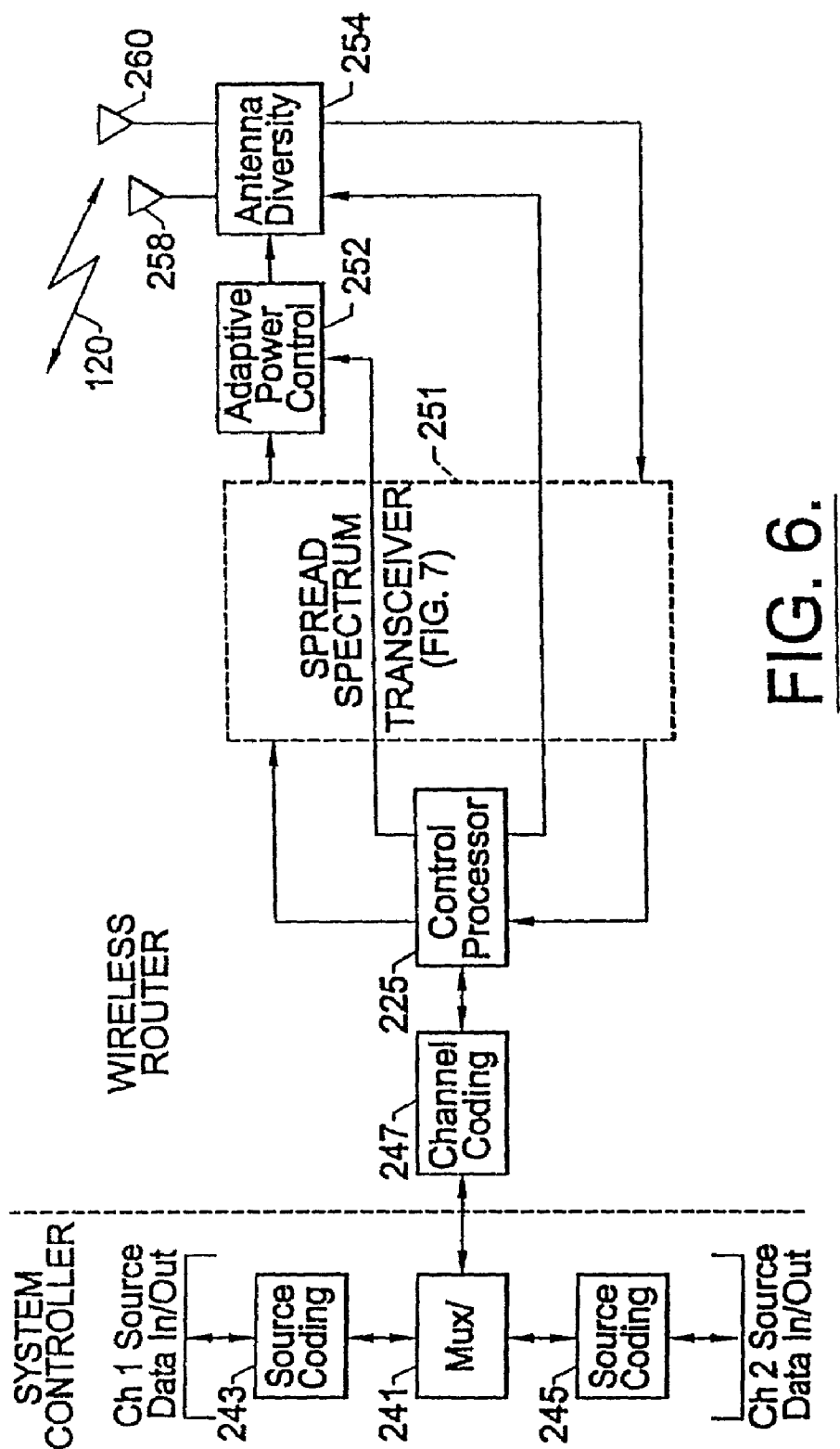


FIG. 6.

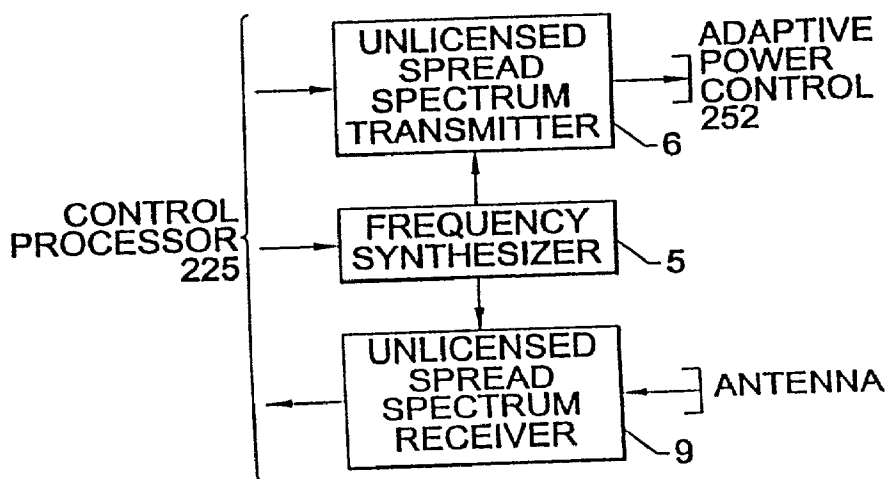


FIG. 7.

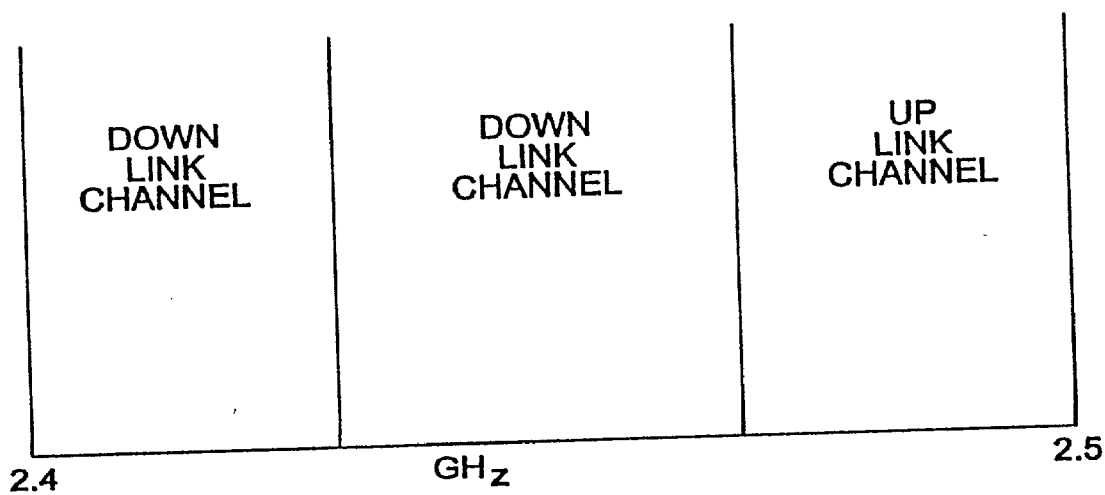


FIG. 8.

WIRELESS, FREQUENCY-AGILE SPREAD SPECTRUM GROUND LINK-BASED AIRCRAFT DATA COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates in general to communication systems, and is particularly directed to an aircraft data communication system having a plurality of wireless ground links that link respective aircraft-resident subsystems, in each of which a copy of its flight performance data is stored, with airport-located ground subsystems, each ground subsystem being coupled, in turn, by way of respective telco links to a remote flight operations control center, where flight performance data from plural aircraft parked at different airports may be analyzed and from which the uploading of in-flight data files may be directed by airline systems personnel.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Modern aircraft currently operated by the commercial airline industry employ airborne data acquisition (ADA) equipment, such as a digital flight data acquisition unit (DFDAU) as a non-limiting example, which monitor signals supplied from a variety of transducers distributed throughout the aircraft, and provide digital data representative of the aircraft's flight performance based upon such transducer inputs. As flight performance data is obtained by the acquisition equipment, it is stored in an attendant, physically robust, flight data recorder (commonly known as the aircraft's "black box"), so that in the unlikely event of an in-flight mishap, the flight data recorder can be removed and the stored flight performance data analyzed to determine the cause of the anomaly.

[0003] In a further effort to improve aircraft safety, rather than wait for an accident to happen before analyzing flight recorder data, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has issued a draft advisory circular AC-120-XX, dated Sep. 20, 1995, entitled "Flight Operational Quality Assurance Program" (FOQA), which recommends that the airlines look at the information provided by the digital flight data acquisition unit at regular intervals.

[0004] One suggested response to this recommendation is to equip each aircraft with a redundant flight data recording unit having a removable data storage medium, such as a floppy disc. Such an auxiliary digital data recorder is intended to allow aircraft safety personnel to gain access to the flight performance data by physically removing the auxiliary unit's data disc, the contents of which can then be input to an aircraft performance analysis data processing system for evaluation.

[0005] Although installing such a redundant flight data recording unit allows airline personnel to retrieve a copy of the flight performance data for subsequent evaluation, when considering the large volume of aircraft traffic experienced by major commercial airports, the above-proposed scheme is not only extremely time and manpower intensive, but is prone to substantial misidentification and aircraft/data association errors.

[0006] Other proposals, described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,359, 446, are to use either a direct line-of-sight infrared link or a fiber optic cable to couple an on-board aircraft computer

system with a ground-based computer system. Obvious drawbacks to these systems are the fact that not only do they employ complex and expensive components, but require that the aircraft be parked at the gate, so that the line-of-sight infrared transceivers or the fiber optic connection assemblies can be properly interlinked. As a consequence, neither of these types of systems is effective for use with commuter, cargo or military aircraft, which are customarily parked on an apron, rather than at a mating jetway, where such an optical link is to be provided.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] In accordance with the present invention, the above-described objective of periodically analyzing flight performance data, without having to physically access a redundant unit on board the aircraft, is successfully addressed by means of a wireless ground data link, through which flight performance data provided by airborne data acquisition equipment is stored, compressed, encrypted and downloaded to an airport-resident ground subsystem, which forwards flight performance data files from various aircraft to a flight operations control center for analysis. For purposes of providing a non-limiting example, in the description of the present invention, the data acquisition equipment will be understood to be a DFDAU.

[0008] For this purpose, an auxiliary data path is coupled from the DFDAU in parallel with the flight data recorder to a bidirectional radio frequency (RF) carrier-based ground data link (GDL) unit, that is installed in the avionics compartment of the aircraft. The GDL unit is operative to communicate with an airport-resident ground subsystem via the RF communications ground link infrastructure.

[0009] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the invention, this wireless ground data link is implemented as a spread spectrum RF link, preferably having a carrier frequency lying in a reasonably wide (on the order of 100 MHz) unlicensed 2.4-2.5 GHz S-band segment, which provides the advantage of global acceptance. A benefit of spread spectrum modulation is its inherently low energy density waveform properties, which are the basis for its acceptance for unlicensed product certification. Spread spectrum also provides the additional benefits of resistance to jamming and immunity to multipath interference.

[0010] A principal function of the GDL unit is to store a compressed copy of the (ARINC 717) flight performance data generated by the DFDAU and supplied to the aircraft's flight data recorder. The GDL unit is also configured to store and distribute auxiliary information uploaded to the aircraft from a wireless router (as directed by the remote operations control center) in preparation for its next flight. The uploaded information may include audio, video and data, such as flight navigation information, and digitized video and audio files that may be employed as part of an in-flight passenger service/entertainment package. The GDL unit may also be coupled to an auxiliary printer that is ported to the GDL unit in order to enable an immediate hard copy of flight data information (e.g. exceedences of parameter data) to be provided to the crew immediately upon the conclusion of the flight.

[0011] Once an aircraft has landed and is within communication range of the ground subsystem, the wireless router receives flight performance data via the wireless ground data

link from an aircraft's GDL unit. It also supplies information to the aircraft in preparation for its next flight. The wireless router receives flight files from the aircraft's GDL unit and forwards the files to an airport base station, which resides on the airport's local area network (LAN).

[0012] The airport base station forwards flight performance data files from various aircraft by way of a separate communications path such as a telephone company (telco) land line to a remote flight operations control center for analysis. The airport base station automatically forwards flight summary reports, and forwards raw flight data files, when requested by a GDL workstation.

[0013] The flight operations control center, which supports a variety of airline operations including flight operations, flight safety, engineering and maintenance and passenger services, includes a system controller segment and a plurality of FOQA workstations through which flight performance system analysts evaluate the aircraft data files that have been conveyed to the control center.

[0014] Depending upon its size and geographical topography, an airport may include one or more wireless routers, that are installed within terminal buildings serving associated pluralities of gates, to ensure complete gate coverage. Redundant base stations may be utilized to assure high system availability in the event of a hardware failure. A large commercial airport exhibits the communication environment of a small city; consequently, it can be expected that radio communications between a respective wireless router and associated aircraft at gates will be subjected to multipath interference. In order to prevent the disruption of wireless router-GDL communications as a result of such a multipath environment, the wireless ground data link between each aircraft and a wireless router is equipped to execute either or both of a frequency management and an antenna diversity scheme.

[0015] Antenna diversity, which may involve one or more diversity mechanisms, such as spatial or polarization diversity, ensures that an aircraft that happens to be in a multipath null of one antenna can still be in communication with another antenna, thereby providing full system coverage regardless of blockage. Frequency management is accomplished by subdividing a prescribed portion of the unlicensed radio frequency spectrum used by the system for GDL—wireless router communications into adjacent sub-band channels, and dynamically assigning such sub-band channels based upon the quality of the available channel links between a respective wireless router and a given aircraft. Such sub-channel assignments may involve downloading compressed and encrypted aircraft flight data over a first channel portion of the useable spectrum to the wireless router, and uploading information from a base station to the aircraft (e.g. video, audio and flight control data) from a wireless router over a second channel portion of the useable spectrum to the GDL on board the aircraft.

[0016] In a preferred embodiment, a respective wireless router employs a source coding system that achieves bandwidth reduction necessary to permit either multiple audio channels to be multiplexed onto the wireless transmit carrier to the GDL unit, video to be transmitted over a ground subsystem's wireless router-to-GDL unit ground link frequency channel, or data files to be compressed to maximize system throughput and capacity during communications (uploads to or downloads from) the aircraft.

[0017] Cyclic Redundancy Check (CRC) coding is used for error detection only. When errors are detected at the wireless router, its transceiver requests a retransmission from the GDL unit, in order to guarantee that the copy of the flight performance data file downloaded from the GDL unit and forwarded from a wireless router is effectively error free.

[0018] In the uplink direction from the ground subsystem to the aircraft, the bit error rate requirements for transmitting passenger entertainment audio and video files are less stringent, and a forward error correction (FEC) and error concealment mechanism is sufficient to achieve a playback quality acceptable to the human audio/visual system. Also, since uploading an In-flight passenger audio/video file, such as a news service or entertainment program, may entail several tens of minutes (customarily carried out early in the morning prior to the beginning of airport flight operations), there is usually no additional time for its retransmission.

[0019] The wireless router transceiver includes a control processor which ensures robust system performance in the dynamically changing unlicensed spread spectrum interference environment of the ground data link by making decisions based on link signal quality, for the purpose of setting transmit power level, channel frequency assignment, and antenna selection. The ground subsystem processor also initiates a retransmission request to an aircraft's GDL unit upon detection of a bit error in a downlinked flight performance data packet.

[0020] Before requesting retransmission of a flight data packet, the wireless router's transceiver measures the signal quality on the downlink channel portion of the ground data link. The transceiver in the wireless router assesses the measured link quality, increases its transmit power level as necessary, and requests a retransmission of the packet containing the bit error at a higher transmit power level. It then initiates a prescribed frequency management protocol, to determine if another channel portion of the GDL link would be a better choice. If a higher quality channel is available, both transceivers switch over to the new frequency. The flight performance data packet containing the bit error is retransmitted until it is received error free at the wireless router.

[0021] Because the invention operates in an unlicensed portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, it can be expected to encounter other unlicensed communication products, such as employed by curbside baggage handling and ticketing, rental car and hotel services, etc., thereby making the communication environment unpredictable and dynamically changing. To solve this problem, the present invention employs a frequency management scheme, which initially determines the optimum operating frequency and automatically changes to a better quality frequency channel when the currently established channel suffers an impairment.

[0022] The spread spectrum transceiver in each of an aircraft's GDL unit and an associated airport wireless router includes a frequency agile spread spectrum transmitter, a frequency agile spread spectrum receiver and a frequency synthesizer. In addition to being coupled to an associated control processor, the spread spectrum transmitter is coupled to an adaptive power control unit and an antenna diversity unit. Such a power allocation mechanism makes more efficient use of available power sources, reduces interfer-

ence, and makes more efficient use of the allocated frequency spectrum. The control processors at each end of the wireless ground link execute a communication start-up protocol, through which they sequentially evaluate all of the available frequency channels in the unlicensed 2.4-2.5 GHz S-band segment of interest and assess the link quality of each of these channels.

[0023] Each wireless router transceiver sequentially and repeatedly sends out a probe message directed to any of the GDL units that are within the communication range of gates served by that wireless router, on each of all possible frequency channels into which the 2.4-2.5 GHz S-band spread spectrum bandwidth has been divided. Each GDL unit within communication range of the wireless router returns a response message on each frequency channel, and indicates which frequency is preferred, based upon the signal quality assessment and measured signal quality by its communication processor. The wireless router control processor evaluates the responses from each of the GDL units, selects the frequency of choice, and then notifies the GDL units within communication range of its decision. This process is periodically repeated and is executed automatically in the event of a retransmission request from a GDL unit.

[0024] As described earlier, in an environment such as a large commercial airport, a common cause of reduced signal quality is multipath interference resulting from sudden attenuation in the direct path between the transmitters and the receivers in the wireless router and aircraft, in conjunction with a delayed signal arriving at the receiver from a reflected path. This sudden attenuation in the direct path between the aircraft and the wireless router can result in the destructive summation of multiple paths at the antenna in use, resulting in a severe signal fading condition. The nature of multipath is such that switching to a second spatially separated or orthogonally polarized antenna can result in a significant improvement in link performance. Since the wireless networking environment of an airport is one in which objects are likely to be moving between the wireless router and the aircraft, and one of the platforms (the aircraft) is mobile, antenna diversity can make the difference between reliable and unreliable system performance.

[0025] Pursuant to the invention, upon the occurrence of a prescribed reduction in link quality, an antenna diversity mechanism is employed. Such a mechanism may involve the use of separate transceivers (each having a respective antenna), or an antenna diversity unit that switches between a pair of spatially separated or orthogonally polarized antennas. Link performance is evaluated for each antenna in real time, on a packet-by-packet basis, to determine which antenna provides the best receive signal quality at the wireless router.

[0026] Signal quality is continually measured at the receiver demodulator output and reported to the control processor. Should there be a sudden degradation in link signal quality, the wireless router control processor switches over to the other antenna. If the degradation in signal quality cannot be corrected by invoking the antenna diversity mechanism, such as by switching antennas the wireless router has the option of increasing the transmit power level at both ends of the link to compensate for the reduction in link quality and/or execute the frequency management rou-

tine to search for a better operating channel. In the wireless router's broadcast mode, the same signal can be transmitted from both antennas in order to assure reliable reception at all aircraft, regardless of changing multipath conditions.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0027] FIG. 1 diagrammatically illustrates the overall system architecture of the wireless ground link-based aircraft data communication system according to the present invention;

[0028] FIG. 1A diagrammatically illustrates a non-limiting example of where, within the terminal topography of Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport, various subsystem portions of the system architecture of FIG. 1 may be installed;

[0029] FIG. 1B diagrammatically illustrates a modification of FIG. 1A showing various subsystem portions of the system architecture of FIG. 1 installed within the terminal topography of Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport;

[0030] FIG. 1C lists identifications of the subsystem components of FIGS. 1, 1A and 1B;

[0031] FIG. 2 diagrammatically illustrates a respective aircraft GDL segment of the system of FIG. 1;

[0032] FIG. 3 diagrammatically illustrates a GDL data storage and communications unit of a respective GDL segment of FIG. 2;

[0033] FIG. 4 diagrammatically illustrates the gate/terminal topography of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport;

[0034] FIG. 5 diagrammatically illustrates a wireless router;

[0035] FIG. 6 diagrammatically illustrates the architecture of the wireless router of FIG. 5 in greater detail;

[0036] FIG. 7 details the components of a spread spectrum transceiver; and

[0037] FIG. 8 diagrammatically illustrates a non-limiting example of a frequency channel subdivision of a spread spectrum transceiver of FIG. 7.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0038] Before describing in detail the wireless ground link-based aircraft data communication system in accordance with the present invention, it should be observed that the present invention resides primarily in what is effectively a prescribed arrangement of conventional avionics and communication circuits and associated digital signal processing components and attendant supervisory control circuitry therefor, that controls the operations of such circuits and components. Consequently, the configuration of such circuits and components and the manner in which they are interfaced with other communication system equipment have, for the most part, been illustrated in the drawings by readily understandable block diagrams, which show only those specific details that are pertinent to the present invention, so as not to obscure the disclosure with details which will be readily apparent to those skilled in the art having the benefit of the description herein. Thus, the block diagram illustrations are primarily intended to show the major com-

ponents of the system in a convenient functional grouping, whereby the present invention may be more readily understood.

[0039] Referring now to **FIG. 1**, the overall system architecture of the wireless ground link-based aircraft data communication system according to the present invention is shown as being comprised of three interlinked subsystems: 1)—an aircraft-installed ground data link (GDL) subsystem **100**; 2)—an airport-resident ground subsystem **200**; and 3)—a remote flight operations control center **300**. Associated with **FIG. 1** are **FIGS. 1A and 1B**, which diagrammatically illustrate non-limiting examples of where, within the terminal topography of Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport, various subsystem portions of the system architecture of **FIG. 1** may be installed. **FIG. 1A** shows overlapping antenna coverage from multiple sites, while **FIG. 1B** shows full antenna coverage from a single tower. The subsystem portions are identified by the abbreviations listed in **FIG. 1C**, and referenced below.

[0040] The aircraft-installed ground data link (GDL) subsystem **100** is comprised of a plurality of GDL airborne segments **101**, each of which is installed in the controlled environment of the avionics compartment of a respectively different aircraft. Each GDL airborne segment **101** is operative to communicate with a wireless router (WR) segment **201** of the airport-resident ground subsystem **200** through a wireless communications link **120**.

[0041] The wireless router segment **201** routes the files it receives from the GDL airborne segment **101**, either directly to the airport base station **202** via the wired Ethernet LAN **207**, or indirectly through local area networks **207** and airport-resident wireless bridge segments **203**. In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the invention, the wireless communication link **120** is a spread spectrum radio frequency (RF) link having a carrier frequency lying in an unlicensed portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, such as within the 2.4-2.5 GHz S-band.

[0042] As will be described, once installed in an aircraft, the data terminal equipment (DTE) **102** of a GDL segment **101** collects and stores flight performance data generated on board the aircraft during flight. It also stores and distributes information uploaded to the aircraft via a ground subsystem's wireless router **201** (shown in detail in **FIG. 5**, to be described) which is coupled thereto by way of a local area network **207** from a base station segment **202** of a ground subsystem **200** in preparation for the next flight or series of flights.

[0043] The uploaded information, which may include any of audio, video and data, typically contains next flight information data, such as a set of parameter-exceedence limits, and next flight navigation information, including, but not limited to, a navigation database associated with the flight plan of the aircraft, as well as digitized video and audio files that may be employed as part of a passenger service/entertainment package.

[0044] The ground subsystem **200** includes a plurality of airport-resident GDL wireless router segments **201**, one or more of which are distributed within the environments of the various airports served by the system. A respective airport wireless router **201** is operative to receive and forward flight performance data that is wirelessly downlinked from an

aircraft's GDL unit **101** and to supply information to the aircraft in preparation for its next flight, once the aircraft has landed and is in communication with the wireless router. Each ground subsystem wireless router **201** forwards flight files from the aircraft's GDL unit and forwards the files to a server/archive computer terminal **204** of the aircraft base station **202**, which resides on the local area network **207** of the ground subsystem **200**.

[0045] The airport base station **202** is coupled via a local communications path **207**, to which a remote gateway (RG) segment **206** is interfaced over a communications path **230**, to a central gateway (CG) segment **306** of a remote flight operations control center **300**, where aircraft data files from various aircraft are analyzed. As a non-limiting example communications path **230** may comprise an ISDN telephone company (telco) land line, and the gateway segments may comprise standard LAN interfaces. However, it should be observed that other communication media, such as a satellite links, for example, may be employed for ground subsystem-to-control center communications without departing from the scope of the invention.

[0046] The flight operations control center **300** includes a system controller (SC) segment **301** and a plurality of GDL workstations (WS) **303**, which are interlinked to the systems controller **301** via a local area network **305**, so as to allow flight performance systems analysts at control center **300** to evaluate the aircraft data files conveyed to the flight operations control center **300** from the airport base station segments **202** of the ground subsystem **200**.

[0047] The respective GDL workstations **303** may be allocated for different purposes, such as aircraft types (wide body, narrow body and commuter aircraft, for example). As described briefly above, the server/archive terminal **204** in the base station segment **202** is operative to automatically forward flight summary reports downloaded from an aircraft to the flight control center **300**; it also forwards raw flight data files when requested by a GDL workstation **303**.

[0048] The system controller **301** has a server/archive terminal unit **304** that preferably includes database management software for providing for efficient transfer and analysis of data files, as it retrieves downloaded files from a ground subsystem. As a non-limiting example, such database management software may delete existing files from a base station segment's memory once the files have been retrieved.

[0049] In addition, at a respective ground subsystem **200**, for a given aircraft, a batch file may be written into each directory relating to that aircraft's tail number, type and/or airline fleet, so that a GDL unit on board the aircraft will be automatically commanded what to do, once a ground data link has been established with a ground subsystems wireless router. The systems analyst at a respective GDL workstation **303** in the flight operations control center may initially request only a copy of the exceedence list portion of the flight parameter summary report. Should the report list one or more parameter exceedences, the system analyst may access the entire flight performance file relating to such parameter exceedences.

[0050] Referring now to **FIG. 2**, a respective GDL segment **101** is diagrammatically illustrated as comprising a GDL data storage and communications unit **111** (hereinafter

referred to simply as a GDL unit, to be described with reference to **FIG. 3**) and an associated external airframe (e.g. fuselage)-mounted antenna unit **113**. In an alternative embodiment, antenna unit **113** may house diversely configured components, such as spaced apart antenna dipole elements, or multiple, differentially (orthogonally) polarized antenna components.

[0051] The GDL unit **111** is preferably installed within the controlled environment of an aircraft's avionics compartment, to which communication links from various aircraft flight parameter transducers, and cockpit instruments and display components, shown within broken lines **12**, are coupled. When so installed, the GDL unit **111** is linked via an auxiliary data path **14** to the aircraft's airborne data acquisition equipment **16** (e.g. a DFDAU, in the present example). The GDL unit **111** synchronizes with the flight parameter data stream from the DFDAU **16**, and stores the collected data in memory. It is also coupled via a data path **15** to supply to one or more additional aircraft units, such as navigational equipment and/or passenger entertainment stations, various data, audio and video files that have been uploaded from an airport ground subsystem wireless router **201**.

[0052] The airborne data acquisition unit **16** is coupled to the aircraft's digital flight data recorder (DFDR) **18** by way of a standard flight data link **19** through which collected flight data is coupled to the flight data recorder in a conventional manner. In order to enable an immediate hard copy of prescribed flight data information (e.g. exceedences of parameter data) to be printed out for review by the flight crew immediately upon the conclusion of a flight, the cockpit-resident equipment may include an auxiliary printer **21** that is ported to GDL unit **111**.

[0053] As described briefly above, and as diagrammatically illustrated in **FIG. 3**, GDL unit **111** is a bidirectional wireless (radio frequency carrier-based) subsystem containing a processing unit **22** and associated memory **24** coupled to the DFDAU **16**, via data path **14**, which is parallel to or redundant with the data path to the flight data recorder **18**. Processing unit **22** receives and compresses the same flight performance data that is collected by the aircraft's digital flight data recorder, and stores the compressed data in associated memory **24**. The compressed data file includes a flight summary report generated by the processing unit **22**, that includes a list of exceedences as defined by the parameter exceedence file.

[0054] To provide bidirectional RF communication capability with a wireless router **201**, GDL unit **111** includes a wireless (RF) transceiver **26**, which is coupled to the antenna unit **113**. Preferably, memory **24** of the GDL unit **111** has sufficient archival storage capacity to retain accumulated flight data files until the next landing, so that there is no loss of flight data due to airport terminal multipath or single point hardware failures, a requirement that all airports be equipped with a GDL system.

[0055] As will be described, on each of a plurality of sub-band channels of the unlicensed 2.4-2.5 GHz S-band segment of interest, a wireless router **201** continuously broadcasts an interrogation beacon that contains information representative of the emitted power level restrictions of the airport. Using an adaptive power unit within its transceiver, the GDL unit **111** on board the aircraft responds to this

beacon signal by adjusting its emitted power to a level that will not exceed communication limitations imposed by the jurisdiction governing the airport. The wireless (RF) transceiver **26** then accesses the compressed flight performance data file stored in memory **24**, encrypts the data and transmits the file via a selected sub-channel of the wireless ground communication link **120** to wireless router **201**. The sub-channel selected is based upon a signal quality monitoring mechanism, as will be described. The recipient wireless router **201** forwards the data file to the base station segment for storage; further, the flight summary file is automatically transmitted over the communications path **230** to the remote flight operations control center **300** for analysis.

[0056] As noted above, each airport-resident subsystem **200** of the present invention comprises one or a plurality of ground subsystem wireless routers **201**. The number of wireless routers **201** installed at any given airport and the location of each ground subsystem within the geographical confines of the airport is preferably tailored in accordance with a number of factors, such as the topography of the airport, including the location of a tower relative to a terminal's gates, and a desired location of wireless router that facilitates access to communication path **230** to the remote flight operations control center **300**.

[0057] Typically, but not necessarily, a wireless router **201** may be physically installed at a (roof) location of an airport terminal building serving a plurality of gates, such as location **211** in the familiar 'multi-horseshoe' topography of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, diagrammatically illustrated in **FIG. 4**, as a non-limiting example. Where an airport contains multiple terminals or has a large number of gates distributed over a substantial airport area (as does the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport), the airport may be equipped with one or more additional wireless router locations, shown at **212** in **FIG. 4**, in order to ensure complete gate coverage.

[0058] The locations of wireless router locations **211** and **212** are such that, regardless of its location, each aircraft will be assured of having a wireless ground data link with a wireless router of the ground subsystem. In the exemplary environment of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport of **FIG. 4**, the spacing between wireless router locations **211** and **212** is such as to provide overlapping ground link communication coverage, as indicated by overlapping circles **214** and **215**, whose respective radii encompass the entirety of their associated multi-gate areas **216** and **217**. (Similar overlapping circle coverage is diagrammatically shown in **FIG. 1A** for wireless routers located at concourses A and B of the Atlanta airport, as another non-limiting example.)

[0059] Because a large airport, such as each of the Atlanta and Dallas/Fort Worth International Airports, has multiple terminal and maintenance buildings, and a sizeable number of ground service vehicles and personnel, serving multiple, various sized aircraft, from private, single engine aircraft to jumbo jets, the airport effectively exhibits the communication environment of a small city. As a result, it can be expected that radio communications between a respective wireless router and its associated gates will be subjected to multipath interference.

[0060] In order prevent the disruption of wireless router-GDL unit communications in such a multipath environment,

the wireless communication links that are established between the aircraft and the ground subsystem wireless routers preferably employ a frequency management and a diversity antenna scheme that optimizes the choice of frequency channel within the available unlicensed 2.4-2.5 GHz S-band employed in accordance with the invention.

[0061] As noted earlier, antenna diversity may involve the use of separate transceivers (each having a respective antenna), or an antenna diversity unit that switches between a pair of spatially separated or orthogonally polarized antennas, as non-limiting examples, so as to ensure that an aircraft that happens to be located in a multi-path null of one antenna can still be in communication with another antenna, thereby providing full system coverage regardless of blockage or multi-path nulls.

[0062] For this purpose, as diagrammatically shown in **FIG. 5**, a respective wireless router **201** may include an RF transceiver **221** having a pair of associated first and second antennas **222** and **223**, which may be mounted on the roof of a terminal building, as noted above, so as to be physically spaced apart from one another (either vertically, horizontally, or both) by a prescribed separation distance that is sufficient to provide antenna spatial diversity. As a non-limiting example, for an RF carrier frequency in the unlicensed 2.4-2.5 GHz S-band, spacing antennas **222** and **223** apart from one another by a distance on the order of ten feet has been found to satisfactorily obviate multipath interference. As will be described in greater detail below with reference to **FIG. 6**, transceiver **221** has an associated communications processor **225** which is coupled via communications path **230** to the remote flight control center **300**.

[0063] The redundant coverage provided by the diversity antenna mechanism ensures that should an aircraft be located in a multi-path null of one antenna, that particular aircraft can still be seen by the other antenna, thereby providing full wireless router coverage regardless of blockage. In addition, where an additional wireless router is provided, system reliability can be enhanced to provide a high probability of successful communications, should a single point hardware failure occur. This added redundancy prevents a single wireless router failure from severing the GDL airport system coverage, and delaying access to flight files. As pointed out above, in the unlikely event of a system failure at one GDL-equipped airport, the memory **24** of a respective GDL unit **111** has sufficient archival storage capacity to retain accumulated flight data files until the next landing, so that there is no loss of flight data due to airport terminal multipath or single point hardware failures.

[0064] The frequency management scheme employed by each of the wireless router and GDL unit transceivers involves subdividing the unlicensed radio frequency S-band spectral segment (2.4-2.5 GHz) used by the system for inter GDL-wireless router communications into adjacent sub-band channels, and dynamically assigning such sub-band channels, based upon the quality of the available channel links between a respective wireless router and a given aircraft. Such sub-channel assignments may involve downloading compressed and encrypted aircraft flight data over a first channel portion of the usable spectrum to the wireless router, and uploading information to the aircraft (e.g. video, audio and flight control data) from a wireless router **201** over a second channel portion of the useable spectrum to the GDL **111** on board the aircraft.

[0065] Pursuant to a preferred embodiment of the present invention, each wireless router **201** employs a source coding system that achieves bandwidth reduction necessary to permit either multiple audio channels to be multiplexed onto the wireless transmit carrier to an aircraft's GDL unit **111**, video to be transmitted over the wireless router-GDL unit ground link frequency channel, or data files to be compressed in order to maximize system throughput and capacity during upload to the aircraft. The primary advantage of source coding is data compression, which permits any audio, video, or data to be uploaded to the aircraft to be compressed and multiplexed onto a single RF carrier. Employing source coding also eliminates the need for multiple, simultaneous carriers, which increases channel assignment options, and translates directly to improved link performance.

[0066] As pointed out earlier, the unlicensed frequency spectrum is becoming increasingly crowded, so that expanding the number of channel assignment options can mean the difference between being able to operate or not. Fewer transmitters also means lower power consumption, decreased complexity, and improved reliability. Adjacent channel interference concerns resulting from the close proximity of multiple frequency division multiplex transmitters is not an issue with a single carrier system. As a non-limiting example, Motion Picture Expert Group (MPEG) coding may be employed for audio and video signals, while other similarly conventional compression algorithms (such as PKZiP) may be used for generic data file compression.

[0067] In order to provide a reliable bidirectional RF communication link between the aircraft and the wireless router, namely one which is able to withstand the effects of channel impairments such as noise, jamming, or fading, the wireless ground data link communication mechanism of the present invention employs an error detection and retransmission error correction scheme to assure error free communications for downloading flight performance data from the aircraft to a ground subsystem wireless router. While exchanging flight-critical data files in the aircraft-to-wireless router direction, cyclical redundancy check (CRC) coding is used for error detection only. When errors in the downloaded flight data are detected at the wireless router **201**, the wireless router's transceiver requests a retransmission from the aircraft GDL unit. This fulfills the critical requirement that the copy of the flight data file downloaded from the GDL unit and forwarded from the wireless router must be effectively error free.

[0068] In the uplink direction from the wireless router **201** to the aircraft, on the other hand, the bit error rate requirements for transmitting non flight-critical data, such as passenger entertainment audio and video files, are less stringent, and a forward error correction (FEC) mechanism is sufficient to achieve a playback quality on-board the aircraft, that is acceptable to the human audio/visual system. Where the data transmitted to the aircraft is flight critical, the error detection and retransmission scheme as described above for the downlink direction is employed.

[0069] Moreover, because uploading an in-flight passenger audio/video file, such as a news service or entertainment program, may entail several tens of minutes (customarily carried out early in the morning prior to the beginning of airport flight operations), there is usually no time for retransmission of such a large database. Typically, during this

'pre-ops' time interval, with no arriving flights being handled, the entire bandwidth availability may be used for broadcasting one or more video news and entertainment files to multiple aircraft at the same time (using industry standard broadband coding such as MPEG, referenced above).

[0070] The manner in which the above described error detection and retransmission error correction scheme may be implemented in a respective wireless router is diagrammatically illustrated in **FIG. 6**, which details the architecture of wireless router transceiver components and associated interfaces to other system segment components. The system controller wireless router transceiver includes a multiplexer unit **241**, containing system time synchronization circuitry and which is operative to selectively interface one of first and second source coding units **243** and **245** and a channel coding unit **247**. The source coding units **243** and **245** are coupled to respective external data interfaces, while coding unit **247** is interfaced with a wireless router control processor **225**, which serves as a baseband interface between channel coding unit **247** and a spread spectrum transceiver **251** (to be described in detail below with reference to **FIG. 7**).

[0071] As described briefly above, and as will be detailed below, wireless router control processor **225** is operative to ensure robust system performance in the unpredictable and dynamically changing unlicensed spread spectrum interference environment of the wireless ground data link **120**, by making decisions based on link signal quality, for setting transmit power level, channel frequency assignment, and antenna selection. It also initiates a retransmission request to the GDL unit **111** in the event of a bit error in a received (downloaded) flight performance data packet.

[0072] More particularly, when a cyclic redundancy check (CRC) error in the data stream received by the wireless router is detected by channel coding unit **247**, control processor **225** initiates a retransmission request on the return channel portion of the wireless link **120** back to the transceiver **26** within the aircraft's GDL unit **111**. Before requesting retransmission of a flight data packet, the control processor **225** measures the signal quality on the downlink channel portion of the link **120**. The wireless router **201** assesses measured link quality, increases its transmit power level as necessary, and requests a retransmission of the flight performance data packet containing the bit error at a higher transmit power level. It then initiates a prescribed frequency management protocol, to be described below with reference to **FIG. 8**, in order to determine if another channel portion of the GDL link would be a better choice. If a better (higher quality) channel is available, both the GDL transceivers switch over to the new frequency channel (within the unlicensed 2.4-2.5 GHz S-band of interest). The packet containing the bit error is retransmitted until it is detected by wireless router control processor **225** as being error-free.

[0073] As noted previously, since the wireless ground data link system of the present invention operates in an unlicensed portion of the EM frequency spectrum, it can be expected that it will encounter other unlicensed products, which are also permitted to roam without imposed geographic (site-licensing) constraints. As a consequence, the operating environment is unpredictable and dynamically changing. The level of activity within this unlicensed portion of the EM frequency spectrum can be expected to increase

as more and more airport-related services, such as curbside baggage handling and ticketing, rental car and hotel services, etc., use compact (hand-held or headset-configured) unlicensed wireless communication devices.

[0074] This mutual interference effect is similar to that encountered in the HF frequency band, where ionospheric radio links are subject to a number of transmission quality degradation characteristics, such as multipath, Doppler, fading and temporary loss of signal. The unpredictability of this environment originates from the relatively long wavelength of the carrier frequency and the fact that an HF radio wave bounces off the atmosphere, enabling it to propagate tremendous distances beyond the horizon. As a result, interference from transmitters that are geographically separated by great distances can pose problems. Since the ionosphere varies in height and ionization with time of day, season, and the solar cycle, the constantly changing interference characteristics of the HF environment are difficult to predict. It will be appreciated, therefore, that there are a number of similarities between operating in the HF band and operating in an unlicensed frequency band.

[0075] To solve this problem, the present invention employs a frequency management scheme, which initially determines the optimum operating frequency for the GDL link, and automatically changes to a better quality frequency channel when the currently established channel suffers an impairment. Such a frequency management scheme effectively corresponds to that employed in the U.S. Patent to D. McRae et al, U.S. Pat. No. 4,872,182, entitled, "Frequency Management System for Use in Multistation H.F. Communication Network," assigned to the assignee of the present application and the disclosure of which is incorporated herein.

[0076] For this purpose, the spread spectrum transceiver of the present invention, which may be employed in the transceiver **251** of the wireless router of **FIG. 6** and also in the transceiver **26** of an aircraft's GDL unit **111**, is shown in more detail in **FIG. 7** as comprising a frequency agile spread spectrum transmitter **253**, a frequency agile spread spectrum receiver **255** and a frequency synthesizer **257**. In addition to being coupled to an associated control processor, the spread spectrum transceiver **251** is coupled to RF components, including an adaptive power control unit **252** and an antenna diversity unit **254**, as will be described. As a non-limiting example, such spread spectrum transceiver components may be implemented using a direct sequence spread spectrum wireless transceiver chipset and associated signal processing components, of the type as described the Harris Semiconductor information bulletins entitled: "PRISM (trademark Harris Corp.) 2.4 GHz Chip Set," April, 1995, "HFA3624 2.4 GHz RF to IF Converter," Feb. 14, 1995, "HFA3724 400 MHz Quadrature IF Modulator/Demodulator," February, 1995, "HSP3824 Direct Sequence Spread Spectrum Baseband Processor," March 1995, and "HFA3924 2.4 GHz Power Amplifier," Feb. 13, 1995.

[0077] The respective control processors at each end of the wireless ground data link (control processor **225** in the wireless router and the communications processing unit **22** in the GDL unit **111**) employ a communication control mechanism that executes a start-up protocol, whereby all available frequency channels are examined to determine the link quality of each channel. For this purpose, the wireless

router transceiver broadcasts out a probe message to each of the GDL units that are within communication range of gates served by that wireless router, in sequence, on each of all possible frequency channels into which the 2.4-2.5 GHz spread spectrum S-bandwidth has been divided, as shown diagrammatically in FIG. 8. These probe messages are repeated a predetermined number of times.

[0078] Each sequentially interrogated GDL unit 111 then returns a response message on all the frequency channels, indicating which frequency is preferred, based upon the signal quality assessment and measured signal quality by its communication processor 22. The wireless router control processor 225 evaluates the responses from each of the GDL units 111, selects the frequency of choice, and then notifies each GDL unit 111 within communication range of its decision. This process is periodically repeated and is executed automatically in the event of a retransmission request from a GDL unit 111, as a result of a detected bit error, as described above.

[0079] As those skilled in the art are aware, a spread spectrum signal is one occupying a bandwidth much greater than the minimum bandwidth necessary to send information contained in the spread signal. Spreading of a transmitted signal across the bandwidth of interest is accomplished by use of a spreading code, or pseudo-random noise (PN) sequence, which is independent of the information being transmitted. At the receiver, despreading of the spread signal is accomplished by correlating the received signal with a matched replica of the spreading code used in the transmitter. Although implementation complexity and associated product cost have constituted practical impediments to the use of spread spectrum communications outside of niche military markets, recent advances in integrated circuit manufacturing techniques have now made it possible to provide reasonably priced spread spectrum communication circuits so that they may be employed in a variety of other applications.

[0080] In accordance with the present invention the spread spectrum transmitter and receiver components have two particularly useful characteristics. The first is their operation in the 2.4-2.5 GHz unlicensed S-band, which provides both the user and the manufacturer the advantages of global unlicensed operation. Other alternatives restrict usage geographically or require the user to obtain a license in order to operate the system. In the United States, FCC compliance is governed by Part 15.247.

[0081] The second is the use of direct sequence spread spectrum (DSSS), as opposed to the use of frequency hopped or narrowband communications. The inherent low energy density waveform properties of DSSS are the basis for its acceptance for unlicensed product certification. DSSS also provides the additional benefits of resistance to jamming and immunity to the multipath problem discussed above as a function of the amount of spreading employed. Moreover, the number of orthogonal signal dimensions of DSSS is larger than narrowband techniques, so that a sophisticated receiver is readily able to recognize and recover the intended signal from a host of potential interferers, thereby reducing their effect.

[0082] In the current wireless marketplace, where RF spectrum allocations have become a precious commodity, the prospects of unintentional jamming grow increasingly

greater. Spread spectrum is a robust combatant to the growing threat of RF spectrum proliferation. Pursuant to the present invention, the DSSS transceivers employed in each of the GDL unit 111 on board the aircraft and in the airport's ground subsystem wireless router 201 are frequency agile, so that they can be tuned to any of a plurality of frequency channels approved for unlicensed operation in a given country. DSSS also provides the attractive performance benefits of immunity against jamming from interferers and immunity against self-jamming from multipath, as described earlier.

[0083] In order to provide orthogonal signal isolation from IEEE 802.11 users, it is preferred to employ a different PN code than the standard, but still complying with strict regulatory guidelines required for type licensing, such as FCC 15.247, referenced above. In addition, as diagrammatically illustrated in the frequency channel subdivision diagram of FIG. 8, the DSSS transceiver of FIG. 7 may employ different transmit frequencies and a different channel spacing to minimize co-channel interference. This mechanism is akin to that employed in cellular telephone networks which make use of a return channel from a cellular base station to allow a customer's handset to reduce its transmit power to the minimum level required to maintain reliable communications. Such a power allocation mechanism prolongs battery life, reduces interference, and makes more efficient use of the allocated frequency spectrum.

[0084] In the transceiver architecture of FIG. 6 employed in the GDL system of the present invention, the signal quality (e.g., bit error rate) is measured by wireless router control processor 225 to sense channel impairments. As described earlier, in an environment such as a large commercial airport, a common cause of reduced signal quality is multipath interference resulting from sudden attenuation in the direct path between the transmitter and the receivers in the wireless router and aircraft, in conjunction with a delayed signal arriving at the receiver from a reflected path. This sudden attenuation in the direct path between the aircraft and the wireless router can result in the destructive summation of reflected paths at the antenna in use, resulting in a severe signal fading condition. The nature of multipath is such that switching to a second spatially separated or orthogonally polarized antenna can result in a significant improvement in link performance. Since the wireless networking environment of an airport is one in which objects are likely to be moving between the wireless router and the aircraft, and one of the platforms is mobile, the use of an antenna diversity unit can make the difference between reliable and unreliable system performance.

[0085] In the event of a prescribed reduction in link quality, antenna diversity unit 254 is operative under processor control to switch between a pair of spatially separated or orthogonally polarized antennas 258 and 260. Link performance is evaluated for each antenna in real time, on a packet-by-packet basis, to determine which antenna provides the best receive signal quality at a ground subsystem's wireless router. Signal quality is continually measured at the receiver demodulator output and reported to the control processor. In the event of a sudden degradation in link signal quality, the wireless router control processor switches over to the other antenna. If the degradation in signal quality cannot be corrected by switching antennas, the wireless router has the option of increasing the transmit power level

at both ends of the link to compensate for the reduction in link quality and/or initiate the frequency management protocol to search for a better operating channel. In the broadcast mode, the same signal can be transmitted from both antennas in order to assure reliable reception at all aircraft GDL units, regardless of changing multipath conditions.

[0086] If the transceiver is unable to produce a satisfactory improvement in link quality by switching antennas in the manner described above, then by way of the return channel, the control processor in the receiver notifies the transmitter of the condition and the measure of link quality. The transmitter then assesses the magnitude of the channel impairment as a result of examining the measured signal quality reported back from the receiver and instructs the adaptive power control unit 252 to increase its transmit power to compensate for the impairment, if appropriate. If the impairment is so severe that the transmitter cannot compensate for the impairment by increasing its transmit power level, it initiates frequency management protocol to find a clear channel.

[0087] In the transceiver architecture of FIG. 6, the spread spectrum receiver unit 251 (shown in detail in FIG. 7) reports assessed received link signal quality to the control processor 225. Signal quality measurements are carried simultaneously with symbol timing measurements and are declared when an acceptable signal is to be processed. The signal quality measured is a function of the average magnitude of the PN correlation peaks detected and of the time averaged phase error. The transceiver also performs a clear channel assessment, by monitoring the environment to determine when it is feasible to transmit. The wireless router receiver makes real time antenna diversity decisions to choose the best antenna to receive from on an aircraft by aircraft basis. Once a decision is made, the same antenna is used for wireless router transmissions back to the GDL unit in the aircraft, except in the broadcast mode, where both antennas 258 and 260 are used simultaneously.

[0088] As will be appreciated from the foregoing description, the objective of satisfying the FAA's current airline Flight Operations Quality Assurance program, which recommends that airlines routinely analyze aircraft data, is successfully addressed in accordance with the present invention by means of a frequency-agile wireless ground data link, that uses a reasonably wide unlicensed portion of the EM spectrum, does not require physically accessing the aircraft, and supplies the same aircraft data provided by the airborne data acquisition unit in a compressed and encrypted format, that is automatically downloaded to an airport-resident base station segment, when the aircraft lands. When polled by a remote flight operations control center, the base station segment then forwards aircraft data files from various aircraft over a communication path such as a telco land line to the flight operations control center for analysis.

[0089] While we have shown and described an embodiment in accordance with the present invention, it is to be understood that the same is not limited thereto but is susceptible to numerous changes and modifications as known to a person skilled in the art, and we therefore do not wish to be limited to the details shown and described herein but intend to cover all such changes and modifications as are obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art.

What is claimed:

1. A system for providing a retrievable record of the flight performance of an aircraft comprising:

a first data store which is coupled to a digital flight data acquisition unit of said aircraft and is operative to store aircraft flight data information supplied thereby; and

a first transceiver, coupled to said first data store, and being operative to download said aircraft flight data via a first, radio frequency (RF) communication link to a second transceiver at an airfield.

2. A system according to claim 1, further including a second communication link coupled to convey downloaded flight data from said aircraft to a base station at said airfield to a flight operations control center for analysis.

3. A system according to claim 1, wherein said airfield further includes a wireless router coupling said first, RF communication link to said base station.

4. A system according to claim 1, wherein said first, RF communication link is a bidirectional RF communication link.

5. A system according to claim 3, wherein said first, RF communication link occupies a frequency spectrum that does not require a site use license by the Federal Communications Commission.

6. A system according to claim 3, wherein said first, RF communication link comprises a spread spectrum communication link.

7. A system according to claim 1, wherein said first transceiver includes an adaptive power control unit which is operative to controllably vary the emitted power level of said first, RF communication link in dependence upon the geographical location of said second transceiver.

8. A system according to claim 2, wherein said second transceiver is operative to convey information from said base station over said first, RF communication link to said first transceiver for delivery to an in-flight utility subsystem on board said aircraft.

9. A system according to claim 2, wherein said second transceiver is operative to upload video, audio and flight control data information from said base station over said first, RF communication link to said first transceiver for delivery to an in-flight utility subsystem on board said aircraft.

10. A system according to claim 1, wherein said first transceiver is operative to download said aircraft flight data over a first channel portion of said first, RF communication link to said second transceiver at said airfield, and wherein said second transceiver is operative to upload video, audio and flight control data information over a second channel portion of said first, RF communication link from a ground subsystem at said airfield to said first transceiver unit on board said aircraft.

11. A system according to claim 1, wherein said first transceiver is operative to compress said aircraft flight data and to transmit said compressed aircraft flight data via said first, RF communication link to said second transceiver at said airfield.

12. A system according to claim 1, wherein said first transceiver is operative to controllably retransmit said aircraft flight data via said first, RF communication link to said second transceiver at said airfield in response to a ground subsystem at said airfield detecting a prescribed error content in downloaded aircraft flight data.

13. A system according to claim 1, wherein said second transceiver is operative to perform forward error correction encoding of information uploaded over said first, RF communication to said first transceiver on board said aircraft.

14. A system according to claim 1, wherein said aircraft is provided with a diversity antenna arrangement to which said first transceiver is coupled.

15. A system according to claim 1, wherein a wireless router at said airfield is provided with a diversity antenna arrangement to which said second transceiver is coupled.

16. A system according to claim 1, wherein said first and second transceivers employ a frequency management mechanism which is operative to tune said first and second transceivers to selected portion of a frequency spectrum that does not require a site use license by the Federal Communications commission.

17. A system according to claim 16, wherein said frequency management mechanism is operative to tune said first and second transceivers to said selected portion of a frequency spectrum that does not require a site use license by the Federal Communications Commission in accordance with an assessed quality of said first communication link.

18. A system for providing a retrievable record of the flight performance of an aircraft, said flight performance data being supplied by a digital flight data acquisition unit to a flight data recorder on board said aircraft, comprising:

an auxiliary data store which is coupled to a digital flight data acquisition unit of said aircraft exclusive of said flight data recorder and is operative to store said aircraft flight data information supplied thereby; and

a first transceiver, coupled to said first data store, and being operative to download said aircraft flight data via a first, RF communication link to a second transceiver at an airfield-based subsystem.

19. A system according to claim 18, wherein said first, RF communication link comprises a bidirectional radio frequency carrier-based ground data link through which said first transceiver is linked to said second transceiver at said airfield-based subsystem either directly, or indirectly through a repeater.

20. A system according to claim 18, wherein said wireless ground data link comprises a direct sequence spread spectrum RF link, having a carrier frequency lying in a frequency spectrum that does not require a site use license by the Federal Communications Commission.

21. A system according to claim 19, wherein said auxiliary data store is operative to store and distribute information uploaded via said bidirectional RF communication link to said aircraft from said airfield-based subsystem in preparation for flight.

22. A system according to claim 21, wherein said auxiliary data store is operative to store and distribute information uploaded via said RF communication link to said aircraft from said airfield-based subsystem in preparation for flight.

23. A system according to claim 22, wherein said uploaded information includes audio, video and data.

24. A system according to claim 22, wherein said uploaded information includes flight navigation information, and digitized in-flight passenger service and entertainment video and audio files.

25. A system according to claim 18, further including an auxiliary printer ported to said auxiliary data store, so as to enable a copy of flight data information to be provided to said aircraft's flight crew.

26. A system according to claim 18, wherein said airfield-based subsystem is provided with a plurality of wireless routers, each having a respective second transceiver and being operative to communicate via a respective RF communication link to a first transceiver on board an aircraft.

27. A system according to claim 18, wherein at least one of said first and second transceivers includes a plurality of antennas.

28. A system according to claim 19, wherein an airfield-based subsystem transceiver is operative to subdivide said bidirectional RF communication link into sub-band channels, and to dynamically assign such sub-band channels for communications between said aircraft and said airfield-based subsystem in dependence upon the quality of available channel links between said airfield-based subsystem and said aircraft.

29. A system according to claim 19, wherein said first transceiver installed on board said aircraft includes an error detection source coding system that enables said second transceiver at said airfield-based subsystem to detect errors in flight data downloaded at said airfield-based subsystem, in response to which said second transceiver at said base station is operative to request a retransmission from said first transceiver.

30. A system according to claim 29, wherein said second transceiver includes a forward error correction mechanism to which data conveyed over said RF communication link is subjected in the course of uploading data from said airfield-based subsystem to said aircraft.

31. A system according to claim 18, wherein said first transceiver includes an adaptive power control unit which is operative to controllably adjust the transmitted power level of data downloaded over said RF communication link.

32. A system according to claim 31, wherein said adaptive power control unit is operative to controllably vary the emitted power level of said RF communication link in dependence upon the geographical location of a wireless router at said airfield-based subsystem.

33. A system according to claim 31, wherein said adaptive power control unit is operative to increase transmit power to compensate for impairment in the quality of said RF communication link.

34. A method for providing a retrievable record of the flight performance of an aircraft comprising the steps of:

(a) storing on board said aircraft flight performance data supplied by way of a flight data acquisition unit to which sensors that monitor flight parameters of said aircraft are coupled; and

(b) at the completion of a flight of said aircraft, transmitting signals representative of the flight performance data stored in step (a), via an RF communication link from said aircraft to an airfield-based subsystem.

35. A method according to claim 34, further including the step of:

(c) conveying flight performance data from said airfield-based subsystem to a flight operations control center for analysis.

36. A method according to claim 34, wherein said RF communication link comprises a bidirectional RF communication link.

37. A method according to claim 34, wherein said RF communication link occupies a frequency spectrum that does not require a site use license by the Federal Communications Commission.

38. A method system according to claim 34, wherein said RF communication link comprises a spread spectrum radio frequency communication link.

39. A method according to claim 34, wherein step (b) includes controllably adjusting the emitted power level of signals transmitted over said RF communication link in dependence upon the geographical location of a wireless router of said airfield-based subsystem.

40. A method according to claim 34, further including the step of:

(c) transmitting information signals from said airfield-based subsystem over said RF communication link to an in-flight utility subsystem on board said aircraft.

41. A method according to claim 40, wherein step (c) includes transmitting video, audio and flight control data information signals from said airfield-based subsystem over said RF communication link to an in-flight utility subsystem on board said aircraft.

42. A method according to claim 34, wherein step (a) comprises transmitting flight performance data over a first channel portion of said RF communication link to said airfield-based subsystem, and further including the step (c) of transmitting video, audio and flight control data from said airfield-based subsystem over a second channel portion of said RF communication link to said aircraft.

43. A method according to claim 34, wherein step (a) further comprises compressing said aircraft flight performance data, and wherein step (b) comprises encrypting and transmitting said compressed aircraft flight performance data via said RF communication link to said airfield-based subsystem.

44. A method according to claim 34, further including the steps of:

(c) at said airfield-based subsystem, monitoring signals representative of the flight performance data transmitted in step (b) for the presence of errors; and

(d) in response to step (c) detecting a prescribed error content in said monitored signals representative of aircraft flight performance data, causing the retransmission of signals representative of flight performance data stored in step (a).

45. A method according to claim 40, wherein step (c) includes performing forward error correction encoding of information signals transmitted from said airfield-based subsystem over said RF communication link to said in-flight utility subsystem on board said aircraft.

46. A method according to claim 34, wherein step (b) includes receiving said signals representative of the flight performance data stored in step (a) by way of a diversity antenna arrangement at said airfield-based subsystem.

47. A method according to claim 40, wherein step (c) includes receiving information signals from said airfield-based subsystem transmitted over said RF communication link by way of a diversity antenna arrangement provided on said aircraft.

48. A method according to claim 40, further including the step (d) of subdividing said RF communication link into

sub-band channels, and dynamically assigning such sub-band channels for the transmission of signals in steps (b) and (c) based upon the quality of available channels between said airfield-based subsystem and said aircraft.

49. A method according to claim 34, further including the step of:

(c) causing at least a portion of said flight performance data stored in step (a) to be printed out to said aircraft's flight crew.

50. A method according to claim 49, wherein step (C) comprises causing at least a portion of said flight performance data stored in step (a) to be printed out to said aircraft's flight crew in response to portion of said flight performance data exceeding flight data parameter limits.

51. A method according to claim 34, wherein said RF communication link occupies a frequency band of 2.4-2.5 GHz.

52. A method of communicating between a first site and a plurality of second sites comprising the steps of:

(a) providing a plurality of wireless bidirectional communication links between said first site and said plurality of second sites;

(b) at said first site, broadcasting a first spread spectrum signal within an unlicensed frequency band;

(c) at a respective second site monitoring said spread spectrum signal broadcast in step (b) and transmitting a second spread spectrum signal to said second site, said second spread spectrum signal having its power level adjusted in accordance with information contained within said first spread spectrum signal.

53. A method according to claim 52, wherein step (b) comprises selectively broadcasting said first spread spectrum signal by way of a selected one of a plurality of diversity antennas based upon the transmission quality of a wireless communication link between said respective second site and said first site.

54. A method according to claim 52, wherein step (b) comprises selectively broadcasting said first spread spectrum signal by way of a selected sub-band portion of said unlicensed frequency band, based upon the transmission quality of a wireless communication link between said respective second site and said first site.

55. A method according to claim 52, wherein step (b) comprises transmitting video information signals from said first site over said wireless communication link to said second site.

56. A method according to claim 52, further including the step (d) of, at said first site, monitoring signals transmitted from said second site in step (c) for the presence of errors and, in response to detecting a prescribed error content in said monitored signals, requesting retransmission of signals from said second site.

57. A method according to claim 52, further including the step (d) of subdividing said wireless communication link into sub-band channels, and dynamically assigning such sub-band channels for the transmission of signals in steps (b) and (c) based upon the quality of available channels between said first and second sites.

58. A method according to claim 52, wherein said wireless communication link occupies a frequency band of 2.4-2.5 GHz.

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