

CRYOGENIC CIRCUIT CONDITIONING SYSTEM

Background of the invention5 Field of the invention

The present invention relates to a system for conditioning and sweeping cryogenic propellant circuits of an aircraft.

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In the context of the present invention, an aircraft is understood to mean any vehicle able to move around in the earth's atmosphere and in space and that comprises at least one cryogenic fluid circuit notably for
15 powering a rocket motor. It may notably be an aircraft with a hybrid aerodynamic and single-stage space flight, such as described in document FR 2 907 422 A1 in the name of the applicant company, a two-stage vehicle or a vehicle comprising a carrier airplane and
20 a spaceplane launched from the carrier airplane.

Technological background

The cryogenic propellant circuits used for the
25 propellants of rocket motors, piping and ancillary devices notably of launchers or space aircraft cannot be left in contact with the ambient air because the moisture contained in this air freezes upon contact with the circuits.

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In the case of very low temperature circuits, for example circuits carrying liquid hydrogen, the oxygen in the air will also be able to liquefy and build up, with the associated risks of fire and explosions that
35 that implies.

Likewise, it is necessary to remove the gases derived from any leaks on these circuits and to avoid any

contaminating of the environment surrounding the circuits with these gases.

5 In order to avoid these problems it is known practice to circulate nitrogen or helium continuously and at a pressure above atmospheric pressure around these circuits as long as the vehicle is on the ground. Such a method for protecting the cryogenic circuits by sweeping with a gas is known as conditioning.

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Space launchers using cryogenic-propellant propulsion systems have a flight time through the atmosphere that is very short of the order of a few tens of seconds, thereby limiting the exposure of the circuits to atmospheric air during this flight.

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The checking and conditioning of the environment of the cryogenic circuits is therefore carried out on the ground, right before the tanks are filled, using a conditioning circuit connected to the launcher. This conditioning continues until launcher takeoff but the conditioning-gas supply devices are disconnected upon launcher takeoff.

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25 The conditioning circuit continuously sweeps the launcher zones containing cryogenic circuits and tanks with dry nitrogen in the event that the propulsion does not use liquid hydrogen, or helium when hydrogen is used, the nitrogen or the helium coming from an installation on the ground.

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The conditioning circuits also collect any leaked propellant.

35 On the other hand, they no longer need to be fed with liquid during atmospheric flight of the launchers because the rapid ascent of these vehicles through the atmosphere leads to emptying of the internal

compartments because of the rapid drop in external pressure.

5 This drop in pressure means that there is also no ingress of external air into the relevant compartments of these aircraft.

10 The situation of an aircraft of the spaceplane type using rocket motor propulsion using LOx/liquid methane cryogenic liquid propellants or semicryogenic liquid propellants with liquid oxygen is entirely different.

15 This is because a spaceplane will have a cruising phase lasting several tens of minutes in the atmosphere and it then becomes necessary to continue to sweep and condition the cryogenic propellant circuits during atmospheric flight.

20 Such a device and the associated conditioning gas become very penalizing in terms of dry weight both on account of the storage tanks and on account of the mass of conditioning gas.

Brief description of the invention

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One subject of the present invention is a system which bleeds external air and extracts nitrogen therefrom in order to condition the cryogenic circuits at least during the phase of atmospheric flight of the aircraft.

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This invention makes it possible to avoid carrying and storing conditioning gas onboard the vehicle.

35 To achieve this, the present invention proposes a device for the in-flight conditioning of equipment of cryogenic circuits of an aircraft, comprising means for bleeding air from outside the aircraft, means for extracting nitrogen from this air using a nitrogen

separator of the OBIGGS type and means for distributing this nitrogen around said components.

5 The distribution means advantageously comprise pressure-boosting means.

10 The conditioning device advantageously comprises means for distributing the nitrogen around the various equipment items of cryogenic circuits of the aircraft using a circuit of pipework equipped with calibrated orifices.

15 The device more particularly comprises means for encapsulating said equipment to receive the conditioning nitrogen.

20 The device of the invention is advantageously suited to the distributing of nitrogen around the items of equipment of the cryogenic circuits at least during a phase of atmospheric flight of the aircraft.

25 The bleed means are preferably situated on a compressor stage of a turbine engine with which the aircraft is equipped.

According to one alternative embodiment, the bleed means draw air directly from outside the aircraft.

30 The device advantageously comprises drying means in the circuit downstream of the separator.

35 According to one particular embodiment, the device supplements a nitrogen or helium circulation device external to the aircraft and used when the aircraft is on the ground.

The invention applies in particular to an aircraft comprising a rocket motor using one or more cryogenic propellant(s).

5 The aircraft is particularly of the spaceplane type comprising dual propulsion: an aerobic turbine engine and a rocket motor.

10 The invention further proposes a method for conditioning equipment of cryogenic circuits of an aircraft, which comprises a first step of conditioning equipment of cryogenic circuits of the aircraft on the ground using an external conditioning circuit connected to the aircraft, and a second step of in-flight conditioning of said equipment using a nitrogen-
15 separation device of the invention.

Brief description of the drawings

20 Further features and advantages of the invention will become apparent from reading the following description of nonlimiting exemplary embodiments of the invention with reference to the drawings which depict:

in figure 1: a schematic view of an aircraft equipped with a device according to one embodiment of the
25 invention;

in figure 2: a detail of figure 1.

Detailed description of embodiments of the invention

30 The objective of the device of the invention is to eliminate moisture and oxygen from the environment surrounding the cryogenic propellant circuits for the propulsion of a rocket motor aircraft of the spaceplane type by filling compartments containing these circuits
35 with nitrogen that remains gaseous at the liquefaction temperatures of the fuels and oxidants used.

This filling or conditioning notably avoids the deterioration of equipment such as valves, mechanical compensators and other devices such as gaiters or ball joints when this equipment becomes laden with ice
5 because of the ambient moisture.

According to the example depicted in figure 1, the device comprises air bleed means in the form of an intake for bleeding air from a compressor stage 2 of
10 the aeronautical engine 1 with which a spaceplane is equipped and comprises a nitrogen separator 3 of the OBIGGS ("On Board Inert Gas Generator System") type which may notably comprise a membrane type molecular filter.

15 OBIGGS devices are known devices supplied according to customer requirement notably by the French company Air Liquide.

20 The bleed means here are situated on a final compressor stage of the turbine engine 1 with which the aircraft is equipped.

The choice of compressor stage depends on the pressure
25 required for bleeding the gas.

As an alternative, the bleed may be taken from outside the vehicle via an air intake and the bleed means in this case draw air directly from outside the aircraft.

30 It is furthermore possible to position a heat exchanger on the bleed circuit in order to cool the bled air before it enters the OBIGGS.

35 The air from which the nitrogen is extracted is discharged to outside the aircraft by a valve 10.

The nitrogen separator 3 is potentially followed by a compressor and the stream of nitrogen is directed into a distribution circuit 4 in order to perform the conditioning and distribute the nitrogen around the various equipments carrying cryogenic fluids.

The distribution means comprise a circuit of piping and calibrated orifices in the region of the devices that are to be conditioned so as to deliver a quantity of nitrogen that corresponds to the requirements according to the volumes that are to be filled.

The design criterion for these orifices is that given the flow rate of the OBIGGS, the orifices are calibrated to keep the conditioned zones at an overpressure with respect to their surroundings so as to prevent the ingress of oxygen and damp ambient air around the cryogenic circuits.

It should be noted that because the pressure outside the aircraft decreases with altitude, the need for overpressure also decreases, making it possible potentially to limit the flow rate demanded of the device.

The separation performed by the OBIGGS device is normally suited to delivering nitrogen at a sufficiently low moisture content and oxygen content but a drying device may potentially be added in the circuit, this device comprising a discharge discharging the water to outside the aircraft for example via a valve 10.

The device of the invention, which uses no onboard nitrogen tank, offers a significant weight saving and therefore an improvement in performance by comparison with an aircraft that carries the conditioning gas.

In order to limit the volume of nitrogen that has to be generated, the various cryogenic fluid equipment, valves, filters, compensators are encapsulated within casings through which the nitrogen is swept.

- 5 The piping is, for example, double-walled piping with nitrogen circulating between the internal wall and the external wall thereof.

10 In the case of a thermally insulating external wall, the nitrogen and the external wall thermally insulate the piping.

It should be noted that in order not to have to supply excessive volumes of nitrogen with the onboard means,
15 the device of the invention advantageously supplements a ground-based nitrogen circulation device external to the aircraft using which the conditioning volume is filled beforehand.

20 In this way, the device of the invention then merely has to compensate for the losses from the circuit once the aircraft is in flight and to distribute the nitrogen around the cryogenic circuits during the phase of atmospheric flight of the aircraft as a replacement
25 for the volume of nitrogen escaping from the circuit.

It should be noted that the invention does not apply for a cryogenic fuel circuit containing liquid hydrogen, because in that case nitrogen, which will freeze,
30 cannot be used.

The invention applies for example to a single-vehicle spaceplane with dual propulsion: turbojet engine and rocket motor.

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Figure 1 depicts a schematic example of such an aircraft comprising a device of the invention.

The aircraft is provided with a turbojet engine 1, from which the air used to extract the nitrogen is bled, is provided with a rocket motor 100, and is provided with tanks 101, 102 for cryogenic propellants distributed to the rocket motor by pipework 103, 104.

The aircraft fuselage interface is represented schematically by the box 120 and the rocket motor environment is represented schematically by the box 110.

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The function of sweeping/conditioning during atmospheric flight is carried out by bleeding compressed external air 12, downstream of the compressor 2 of the turbojet engine 1 of the spaceplane, then by separating the nitrogen using equipment 3 of the OBIGGS type.

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The nitrogen is then conveyed at a very low moisture and oxygen content by a circuit of piping 4 comprising notably, according to figure 2, gas distribution orifices 5 which are calibrated in a manner appropriate to distributing the nitrogen around the various equipments 6, 7, 8 of the cryogenic circuits for example: electrically operated valves 6, 7, filters or compensators, cardan joints 8 on the cryogenic propellant piping 103, 104.

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The equipments that are not incorporated into the casings are encapsulated in sleeves 13 to make it possible to reduce the volume of conditioning fluid needed.

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According to the example, the OBIGGS device 3 is followed by drying means 9 and the outlet for wet gases 10 is exhausted to outside the aircraft.

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At the end of the circuit, the conditioning nitrogen is exhausted 11 in the region of the encapsulated

components 6, 7, 8 so that there is always gas being swept around these components.

The design of the circuit, the volumes of the sleeves
5 13 and the calibration of the gas distribution orifices
5 and of the leaks allows control over the pressure so
as to ensure that the flow of conditioning gas is in
the direction from OBIGGs source toward the exhaust or
exhausts of the conditioning circuit without ambient
10 air entering the zones that are to be protected.

It will be noted that if the aircraft is a two-stage
vehicle, with a first stage comprising the turbojet
engine and the second stage comprising the rocket
15 motor, then an automatic connect/disconnect device
needs to be provided on the line 12 to disconnect and
close off the circuits upon stage separation.

The same is true of a system using a carrier airplane
20 and a spaceplane launched from the carrier airplane.

Aside for preventing freezing and deposits of ice on
the equipments or components of the cryogenic circuits
which is achieved by the conditioning afforded by the
25 device of the invention, this conditioning is also
accompanied by a thermal regulation effect; for
example, maintaining the temperature of certain sensi-
tive electrical equipment. This is achieved by the gas
used which opposes the cooling due to the vicinity of
30 the cryogenic lines throughout the atmospheric flight
of the aircraft.

The invention is not restricted to the example depicted
and, notably according to one particular embodiment,
35 the residual moisture in the nitrogen can be condensed
by passing through an exchanger with the propellant
lines at cryogenic temperature and collected or
solidified in a suitable zone. The cooled nitrogen thus

limits exchanges of heat with the propellants when it is being used in the conditioning circuit.

CLAIMS

1. A device for the in-flight conditioning of equipment (6, 7, 8) of cryogenic circuits of an aircraft, characterized in that it comprises means for bleeding air from outside the aircraft, means for extracting nitrogen from this air using a nitrogen separator of the OBIGGS type (3) and means (4, 5) for distributing this nitrogen around said equipment.
2. The conditioning device as claimed in claim 1, for which the distribution means comprise pressure-boosting means.
3. The conditioning device as claimed in claim 1 or 2, comprising means for distributing the nitrogen around the various equipment items of cryogenic circuits using a circuit of pipework (4) equipped with calibrated orifices (5).
4. The conditioning device as claimed in claim 1, 2 or 3, comprising means (13) for encapsulating said equipment (6, 7, 8) to receive the conditioning nitrogen.
5. The conditioning device as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 4 suited to the distributing of conditioning nitrogen around the items of equipment of the cryogenic circuits at least during a phase of atmospheric flight of the aircraft.
6. The conditioning device as claimed in any one of the preceding claims, for which the bleed means are situated on a compressor stage (2) of a turbine engine (1) with which the aircraft is equipped.

7. The conditioning device as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 5, for which the bleed means directly draw in air from outside the aircraft.
- 5 8. The conditioning device as claimed in any one of the preceding claims, comprising drying means (9) in the circuit downstream of the separator.
9. The conditioning device as claimed in any one of
10 the preceding claims, characterized in that it supplements a ground device external to the aircraft for circulating nitrogen or helium.
10. An aircraft comprising a rocket motor (100) using
15 one or more cryogenic propellant(s), characterized in that it comprises a conditioning device as claimed in any one of the preceding claims.
11. The aircraft as claimed in claim 10, of the space-
20 plane type, characterized in that it has dual propulsion: an aerobic turbine engine (1) and a rocket motor (100).
12. A method for conditioning equipment of cryogenic
25 circuits of an aircraft, characterized in that it comprises a first step of conditioning equipment of cryogenic circuits of the aircraft on the ground using an external conditioning circuit connected to the aircraft, and a second step of
30 in-flight conditioning of said equipment using a device as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 9.