



US 20200240853A1

(19) **United States**

(12) **Patent Application Publication**

Reed et al.

(10) **Pub. No.: US 2020/0240853 A1**

(43) **Pub. Date: Jul. 30, 2020**

(54) **TOWING SYSTEMS AND METHODS USING MAGNETIC FIELD SENSING**

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(21) Appl. No.: **16/851,547**

(22) Filed: **Apr. 17, 2020**

Related U.S. Application Data

(63) Continuation of application No. 16/136,837, filed on Sep. 20, 2018, now Pat. No. 10,670,479.

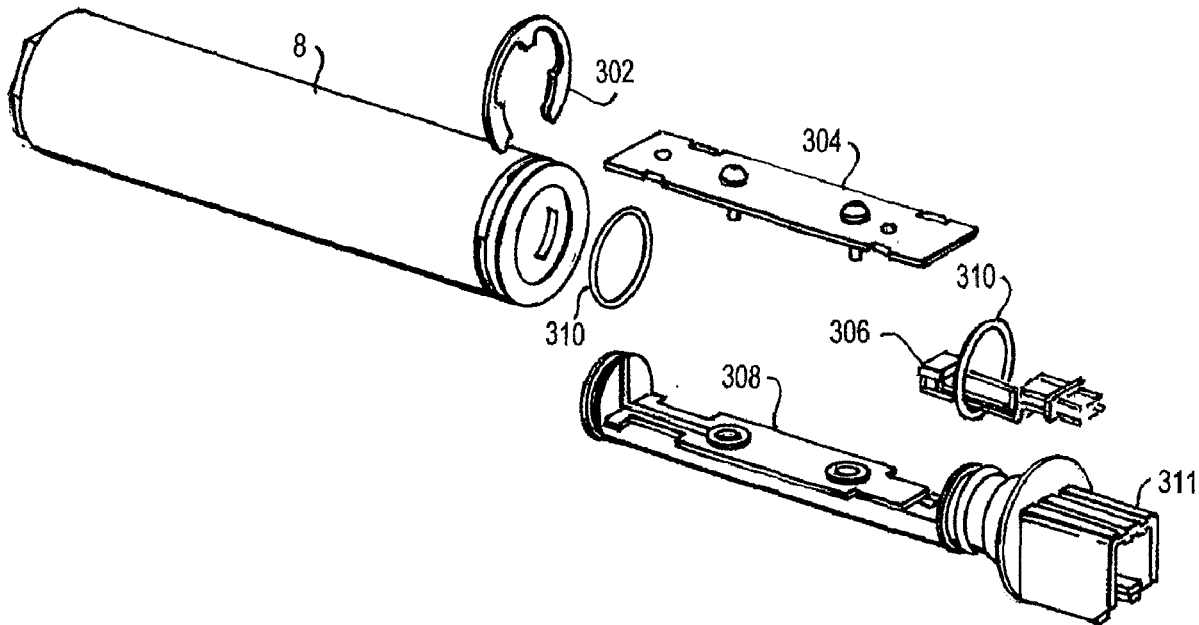
(60) Provisional application No. 62/635,848, filed on Feb. 27, 2018, provisional application No. 62/635,869, filed on Feb. 27, 2018, provisional application No. 62/635,890, filed on Feb. 27, 2018, provisional application No. 62/677,378, filed on May 29, 2018.

Publication Classification

(51) **Int. Cl.**
G01L 1/12 (2006.01)
H01L 41/12 (2006.01)
G01L 3/10 (2006.01)
(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC *G01L 1/125* (2013.01); *G01L 3/102* (2013.01); *H01L 41/12* (2013.01)

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A magneto-elastically-based active force sensor, used with a tow coupling between a towed and a towing vehicle, which outputs a signal useful for determining forces acting on the coupling. The outputted force information may be provided by processor-enabled embedded software algorithms that take inputs from the force sensor and other sensors, may be used by one or more vehicle systems during operating of the vehicle, such as engine, braking, stability, safety, and informational systems. The force sensor includes directionally-sensitive magnetic field sensing elements inside the sensor, and shielding may be used around the sensors to reduce the influence of external magnetic fields on the sensing elements. The force sensor may be used with different tow coupling devices installed on different types of automobile cars and trucks.



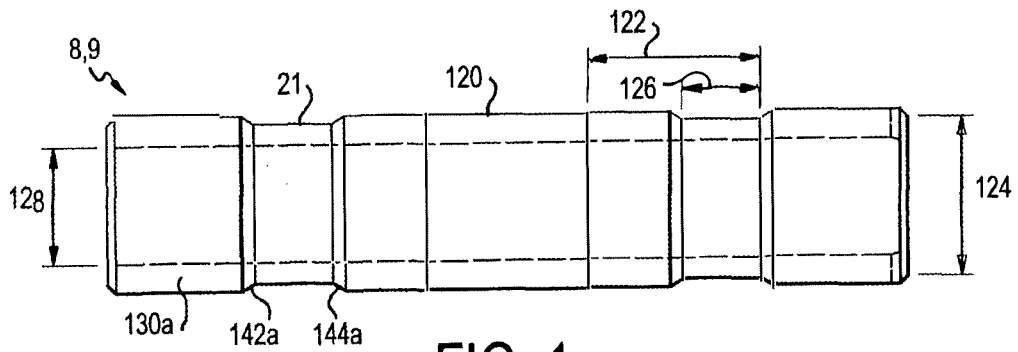


FIG. 1

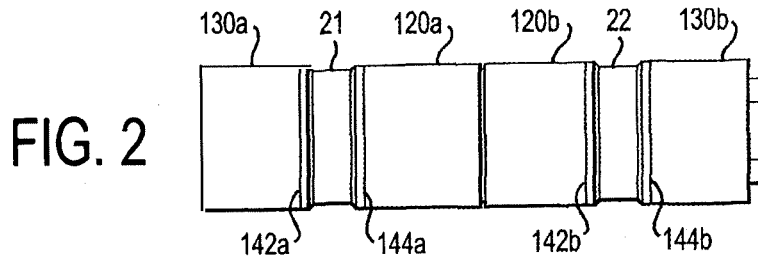


FIG. 2

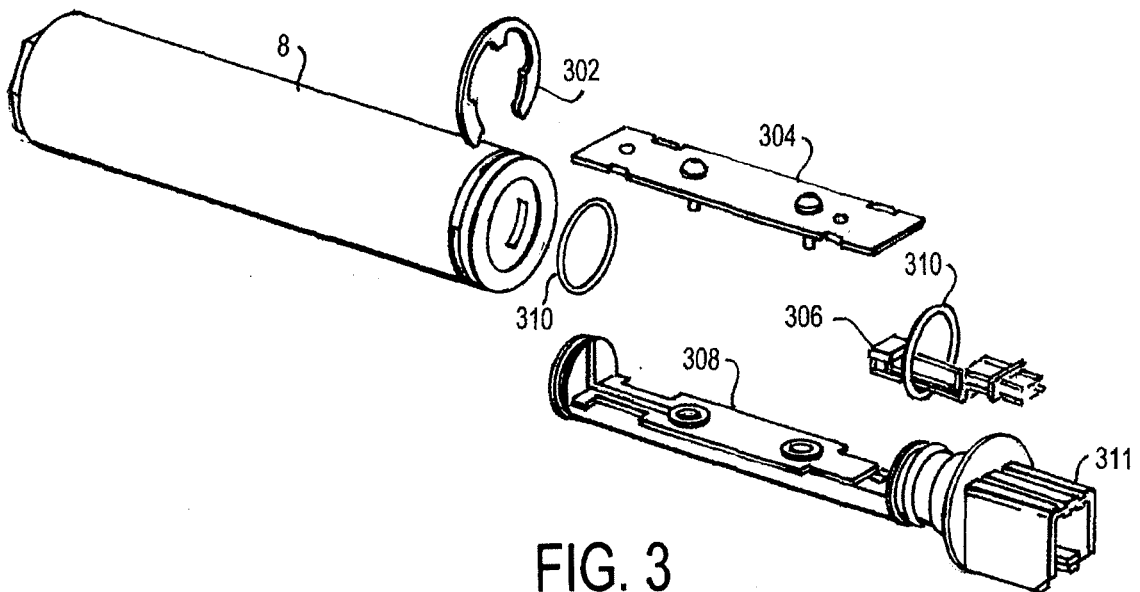


FIG. 3

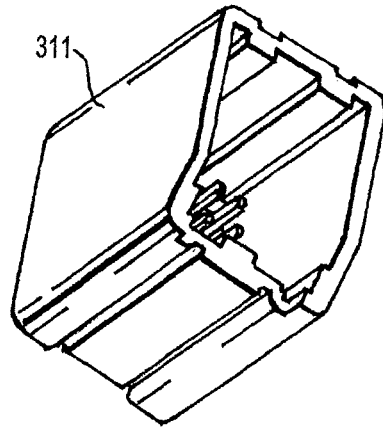


FIG. 4

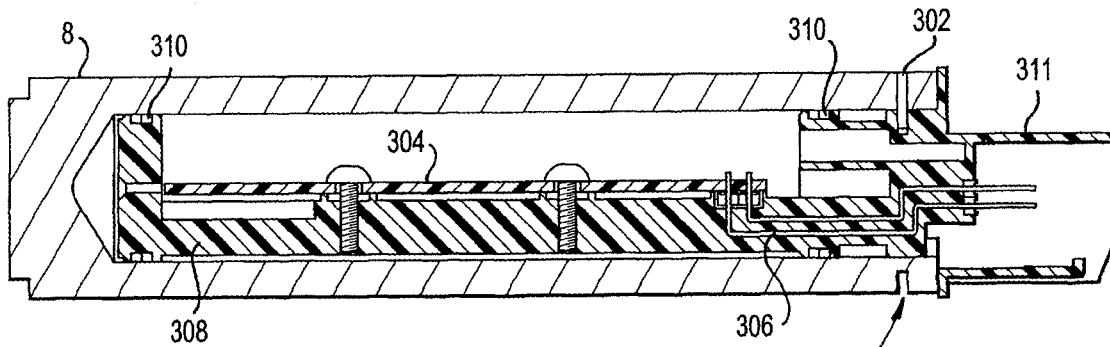


FIG. 5

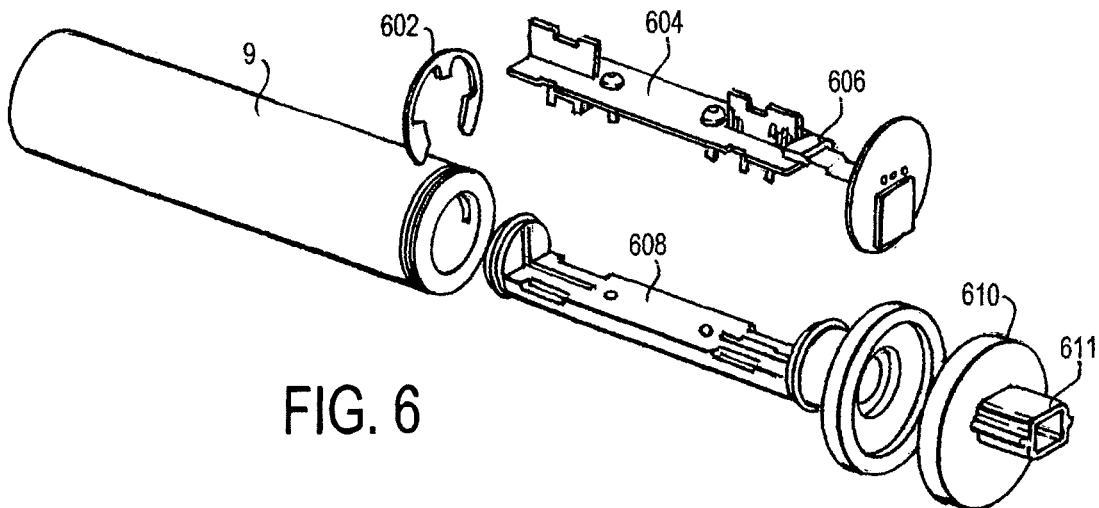


FIG. 6

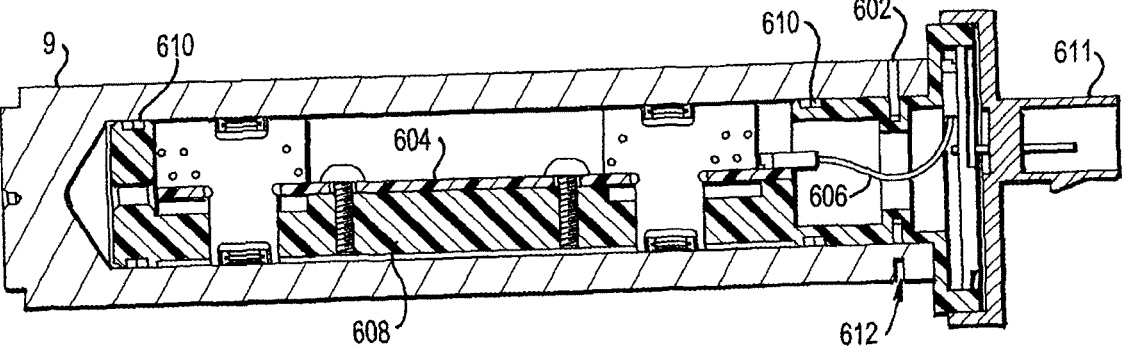


FIG. 7

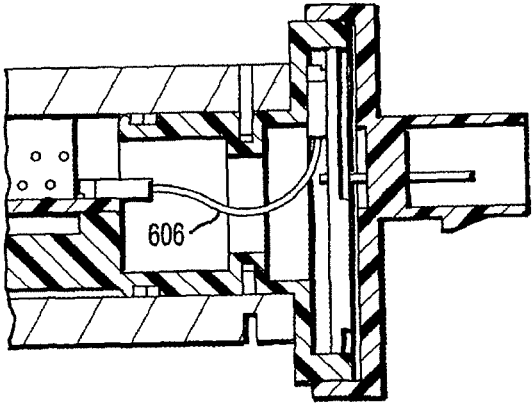


FIG. 8

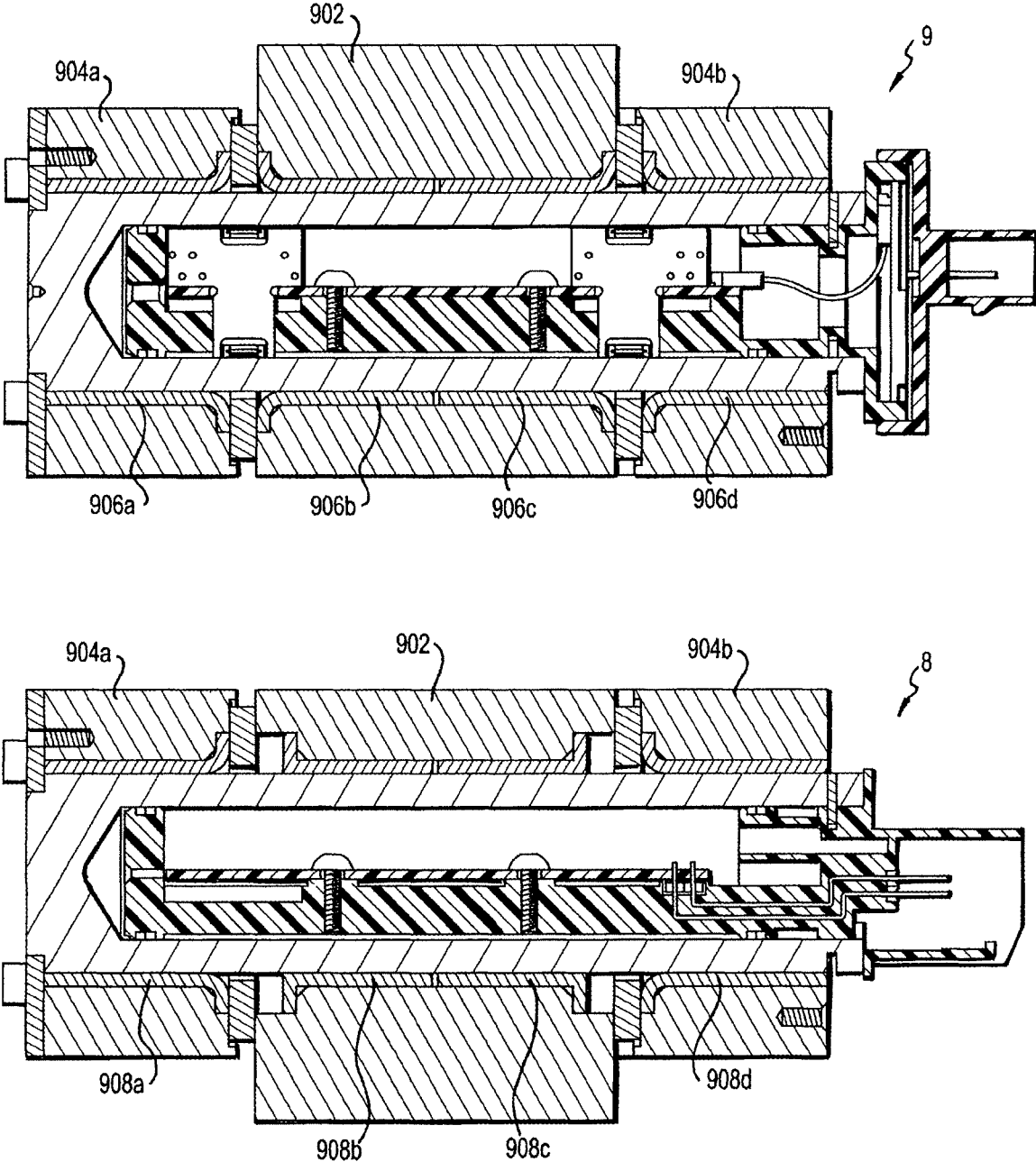


FIG. 9

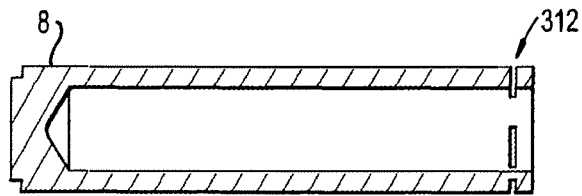


FIG. 10A

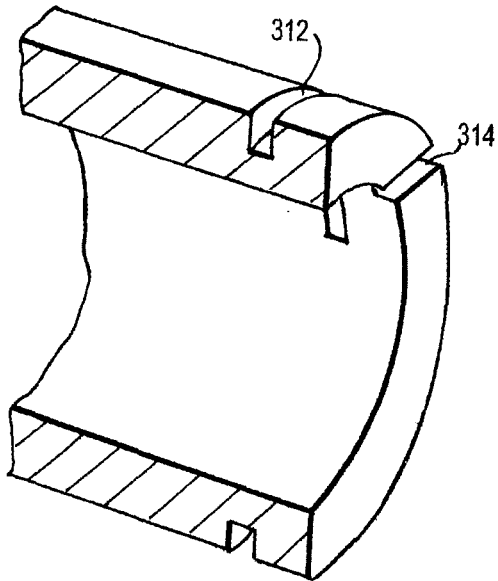


FIG. 10B

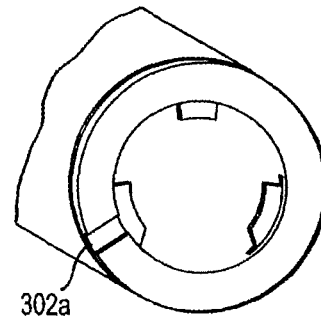


FIG. 10C

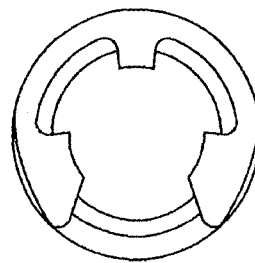


FIG. 10D

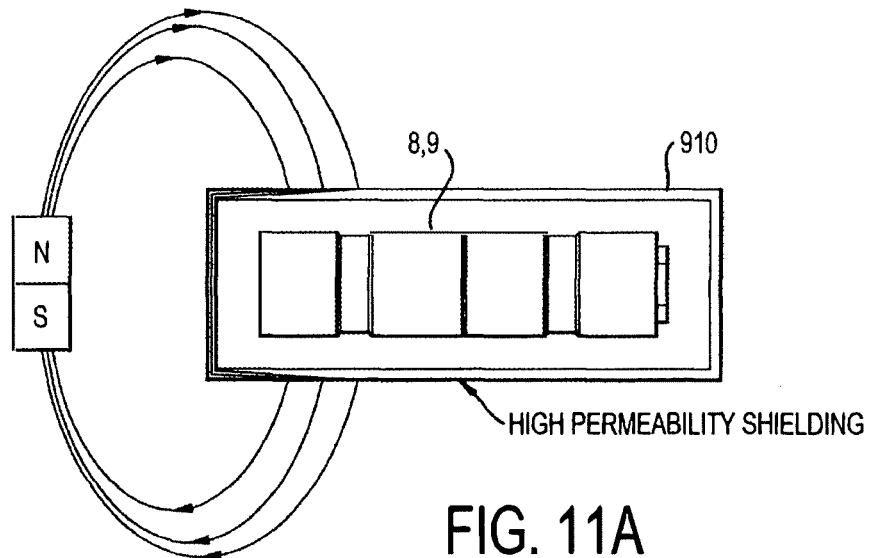


FIG. 11A

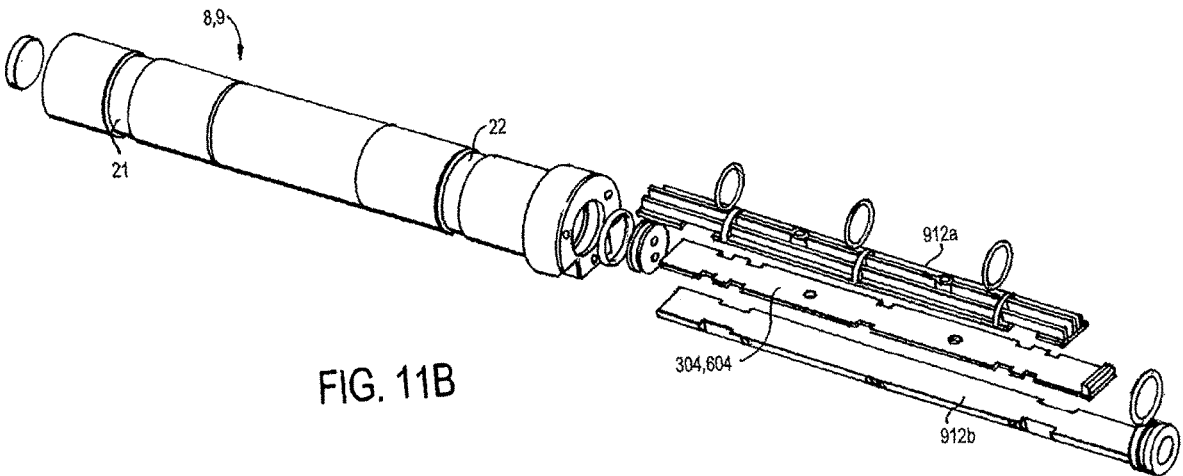


FIG. 11B

FIG. 12A

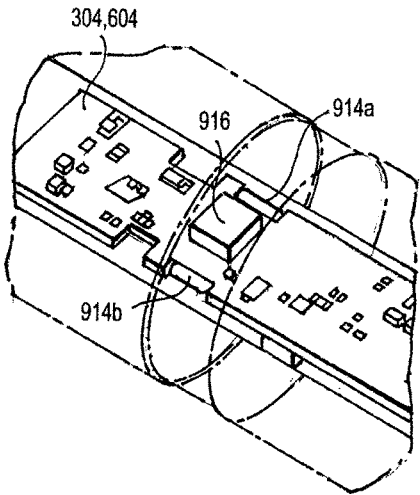
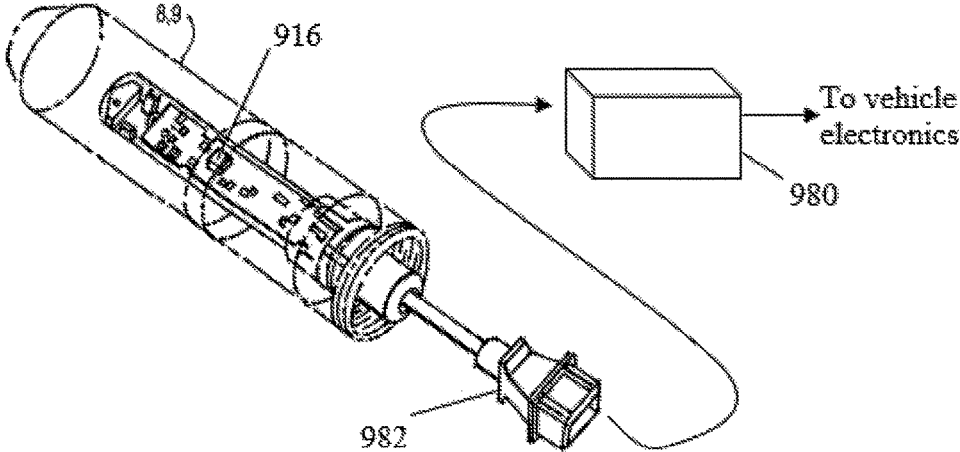


FIG. 12B

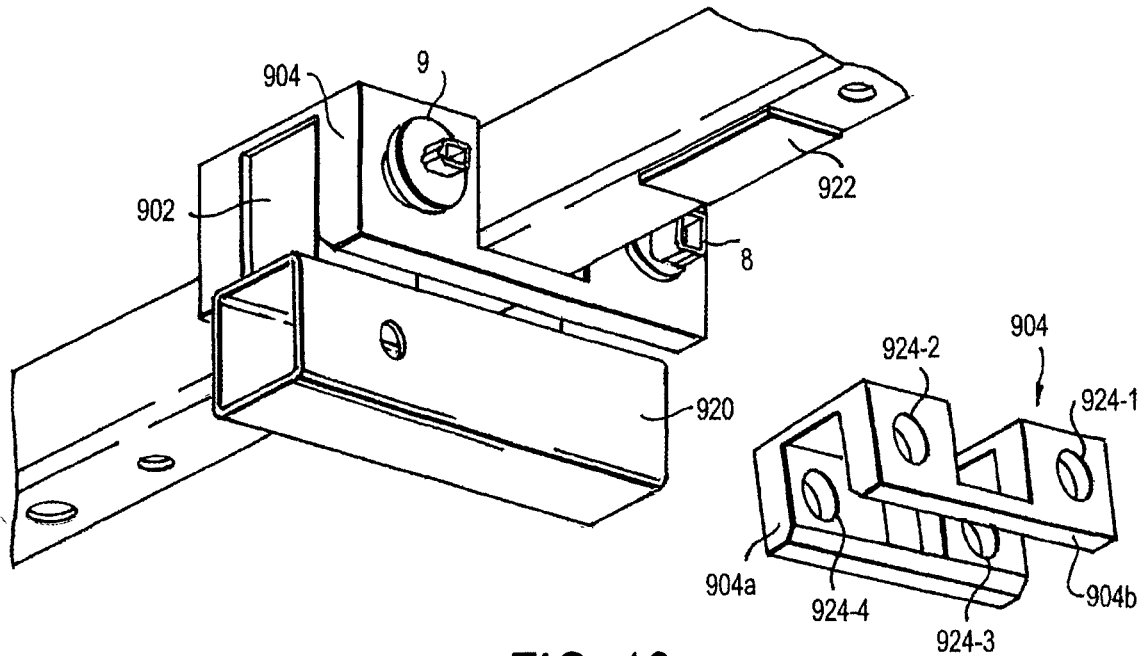


FIG. 13

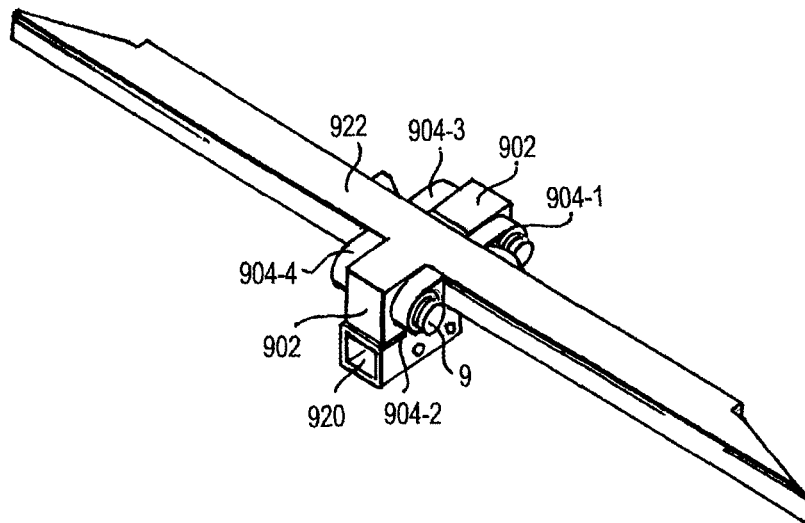


FIG. 14

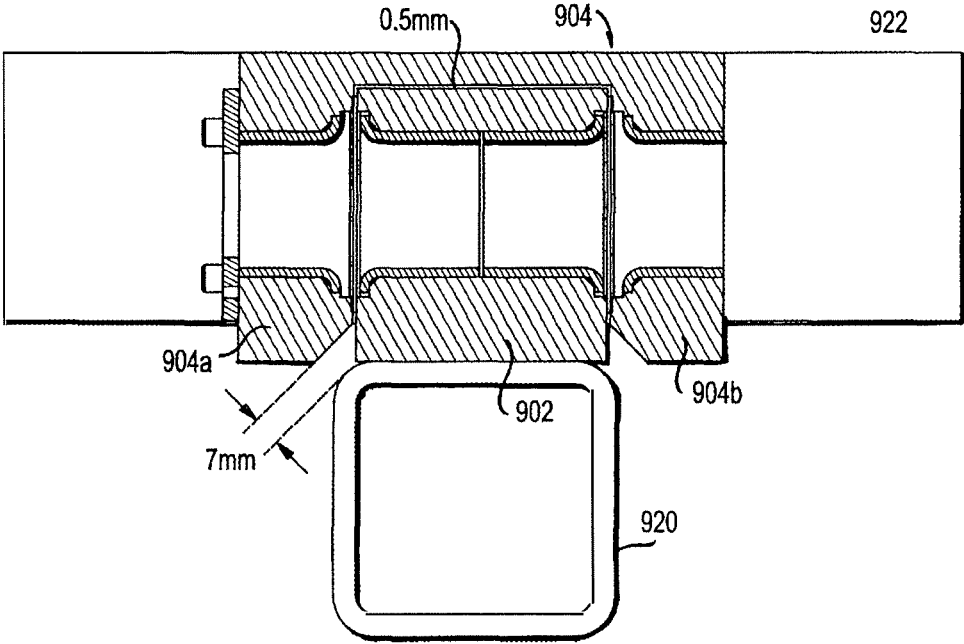


FIG. 15

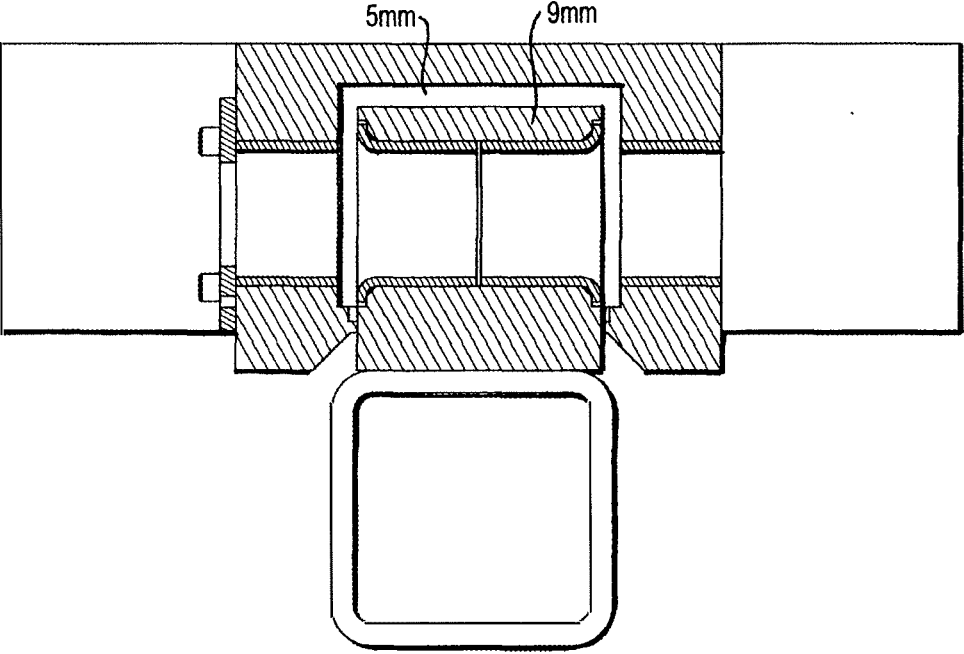


FIG. 16

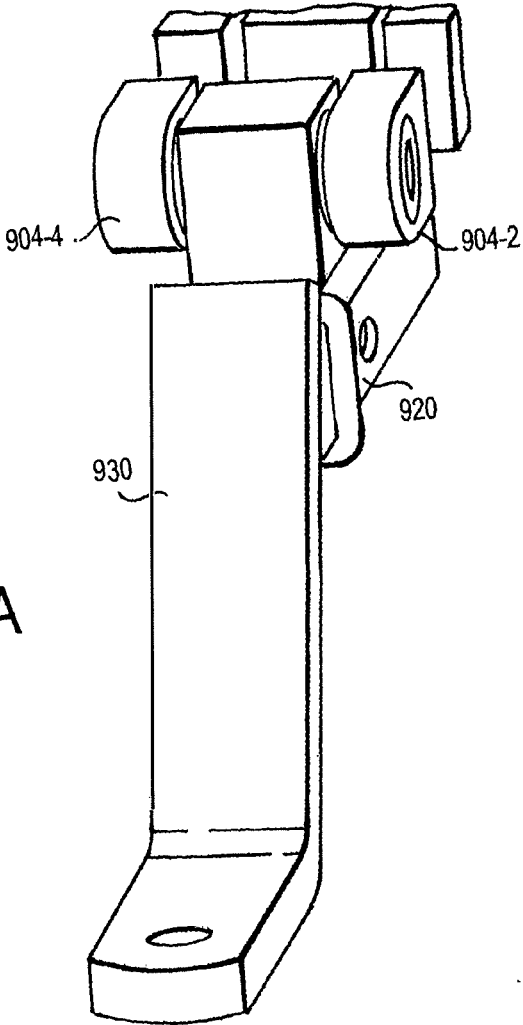


FIG. 17A

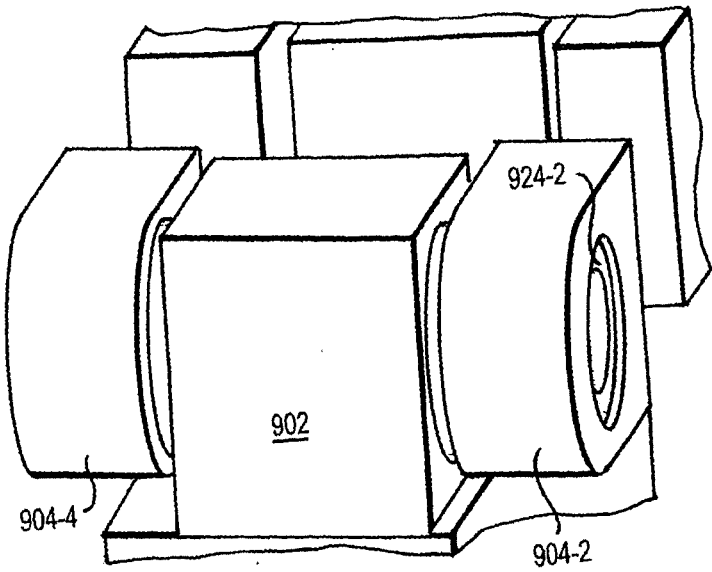


FIG. 17B

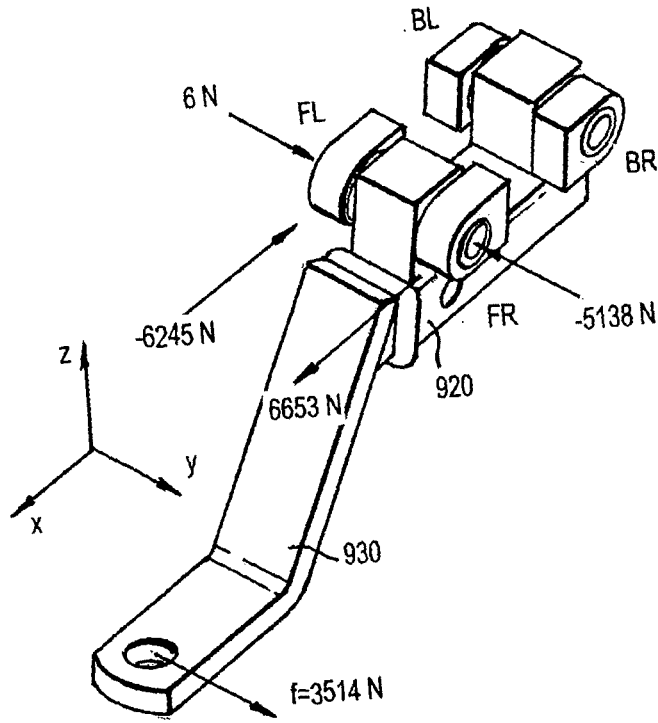


FIG. 18A

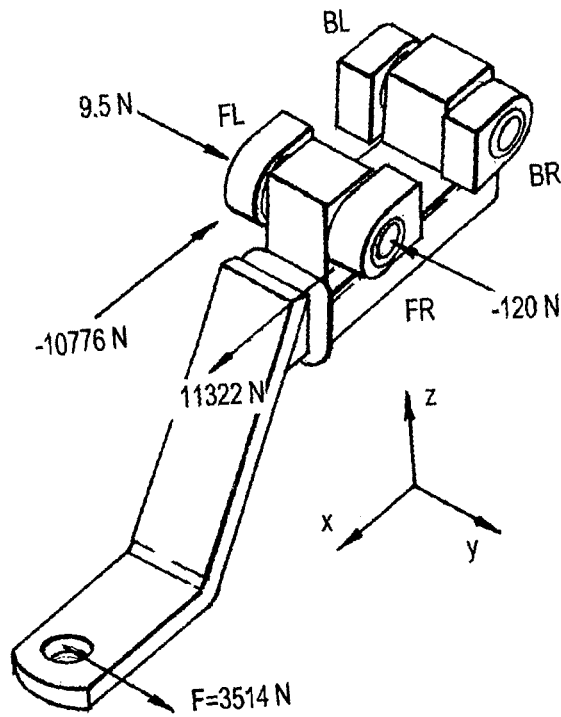


FIG. 18B

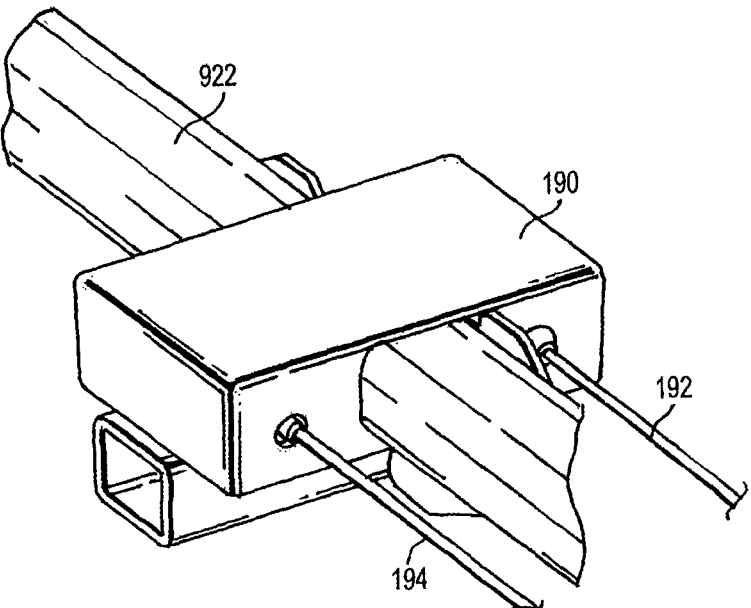


FIG. 19A

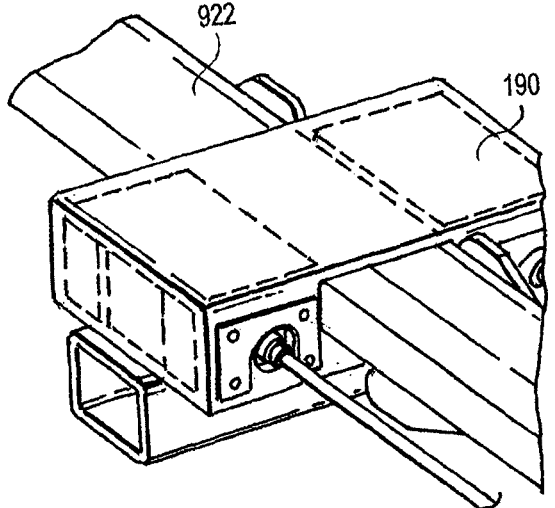


FIG. 19B

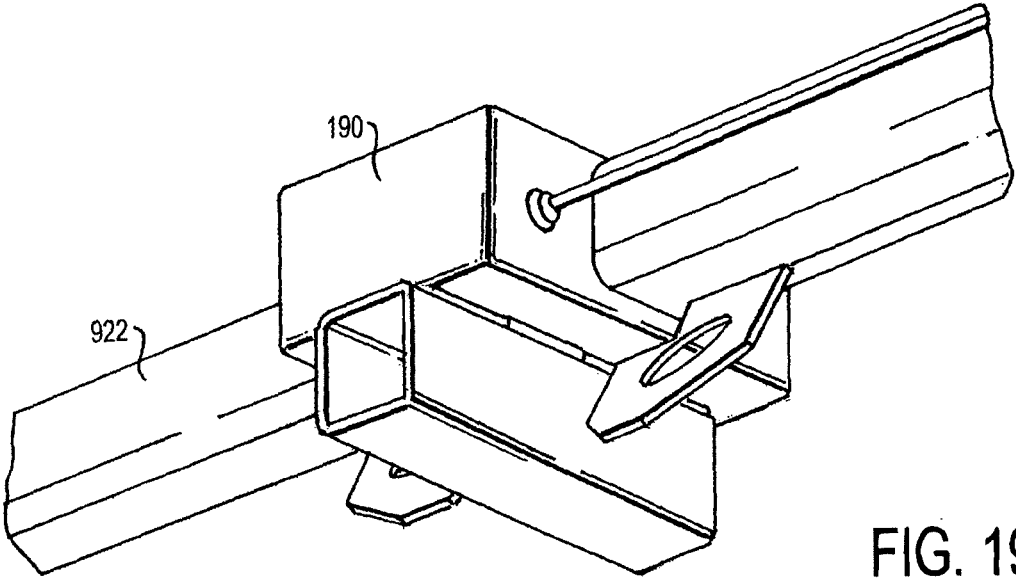


FIG. 19C

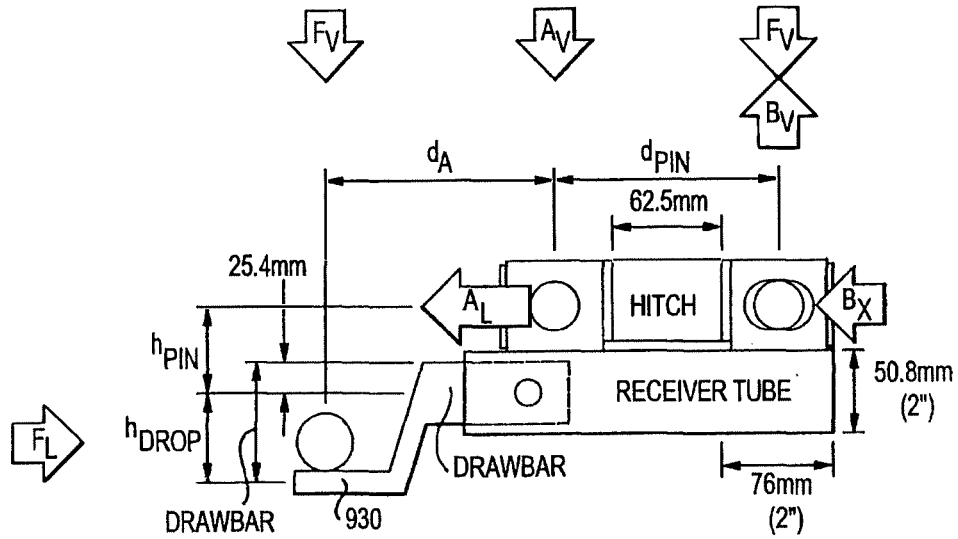


FIG. 20

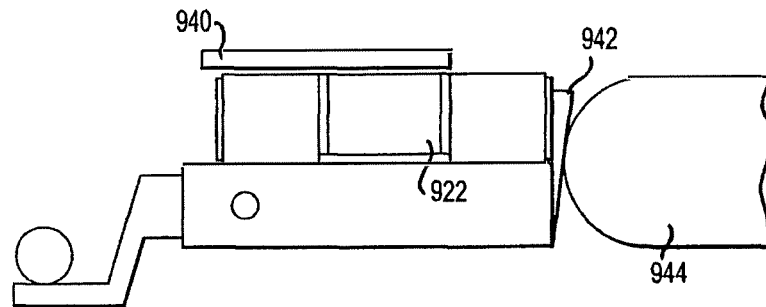
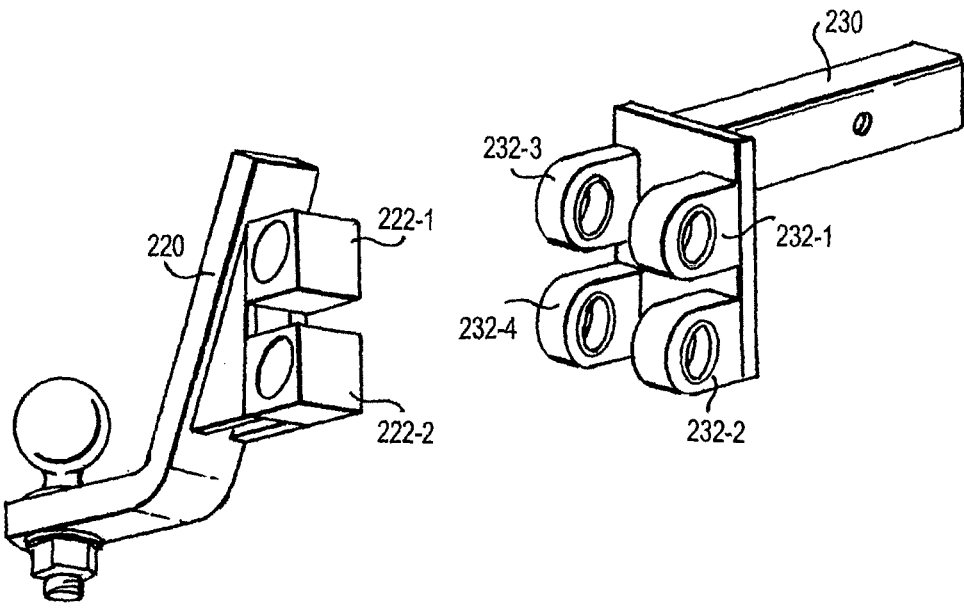
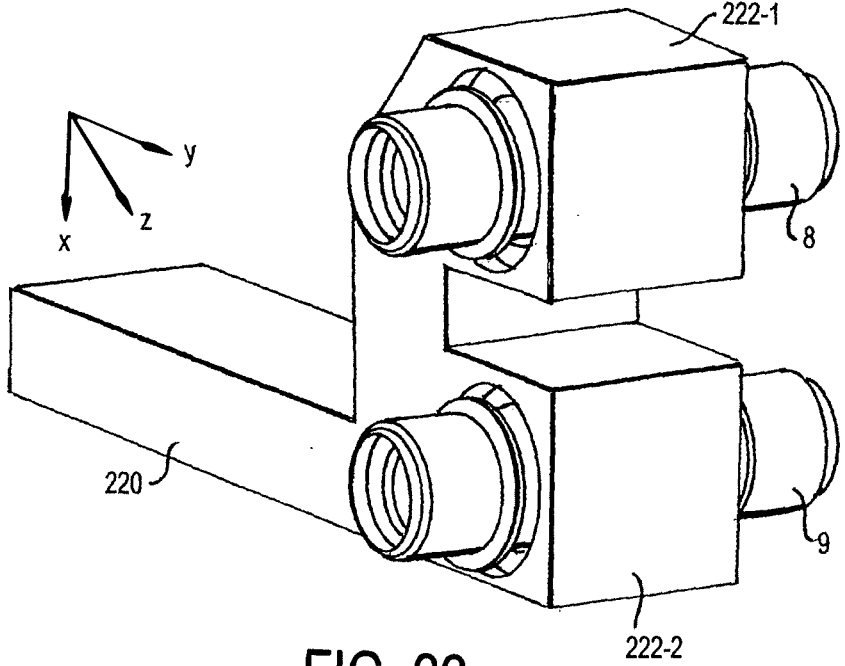


FIG. 21



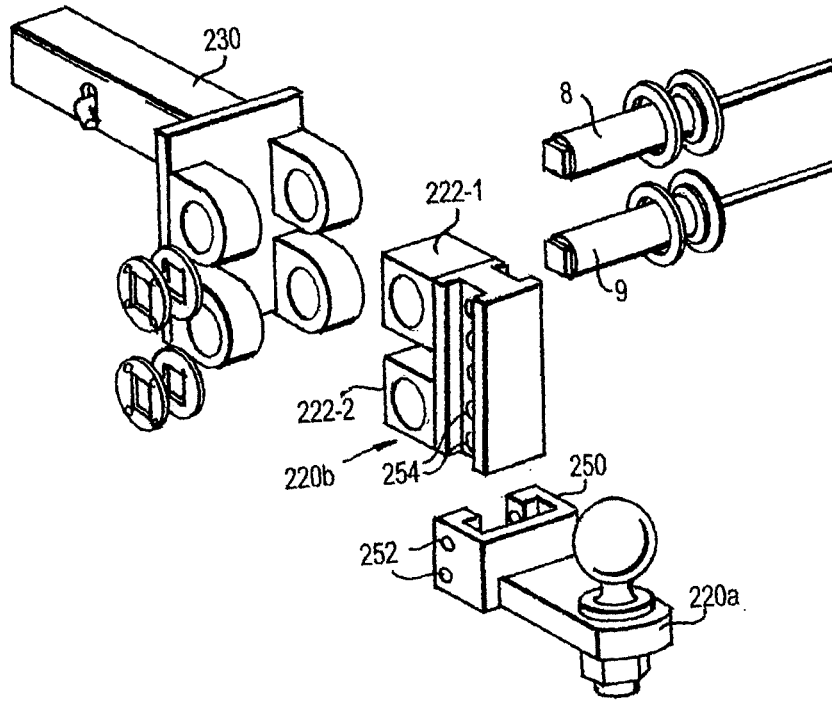


FIG. 25

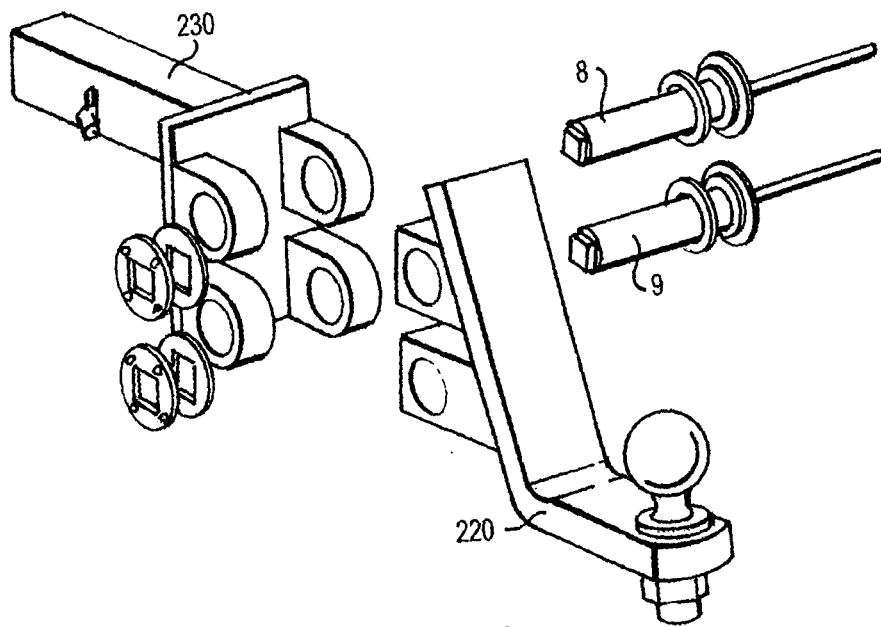


FIG. 24

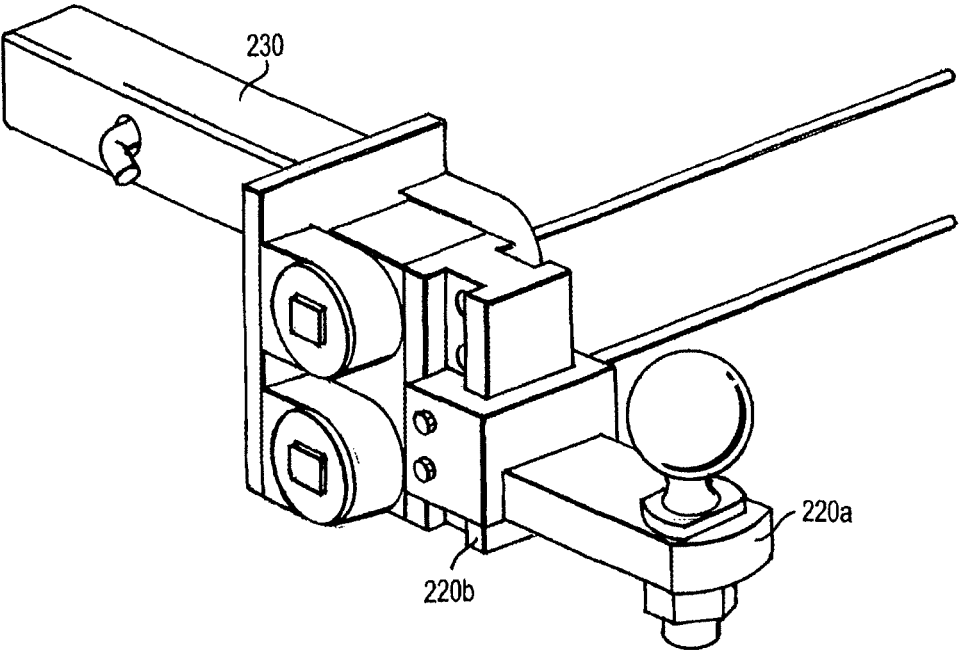
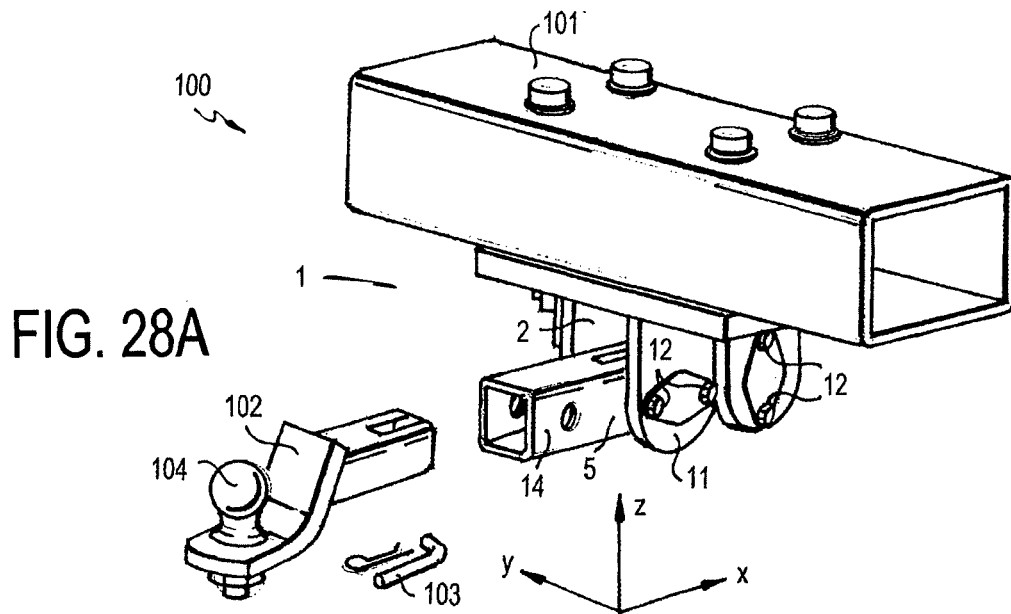
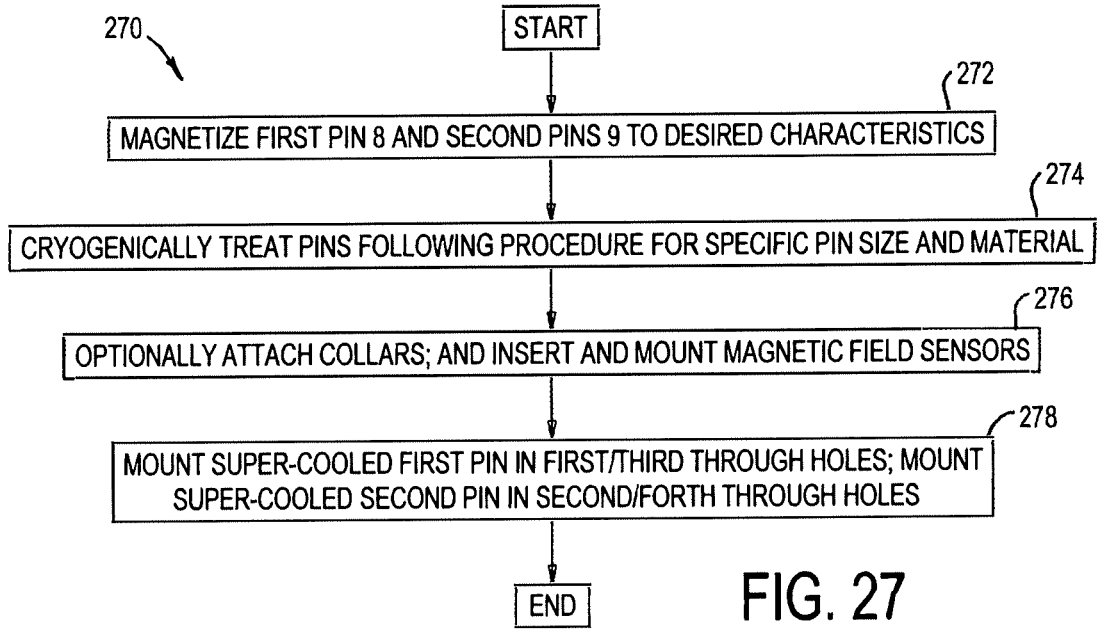


FIG. 26



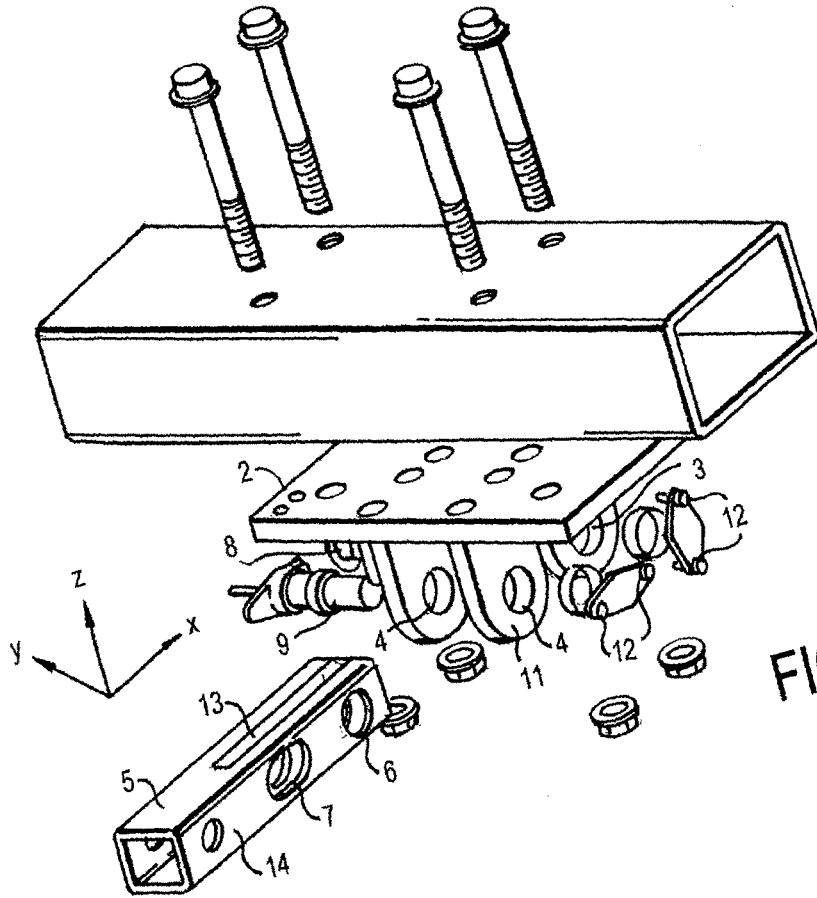


FIG. 28B

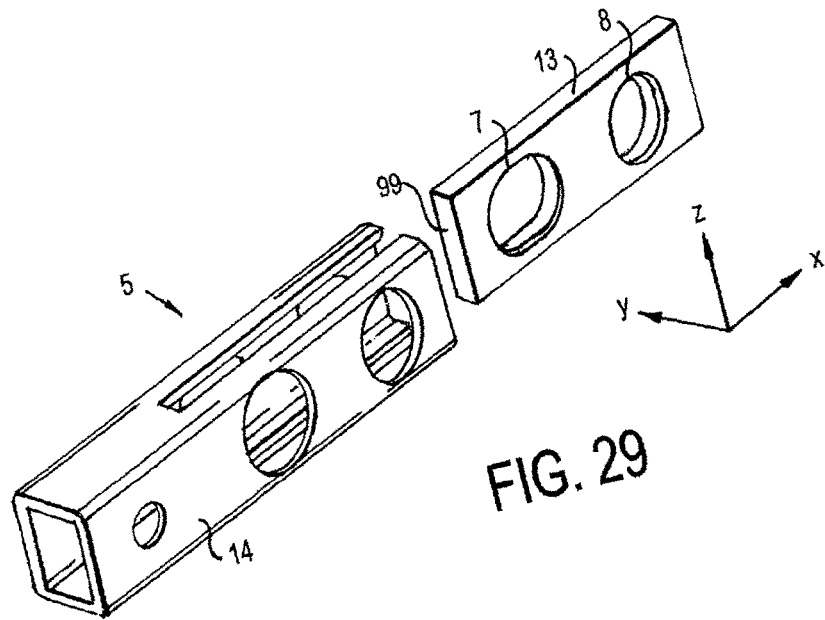
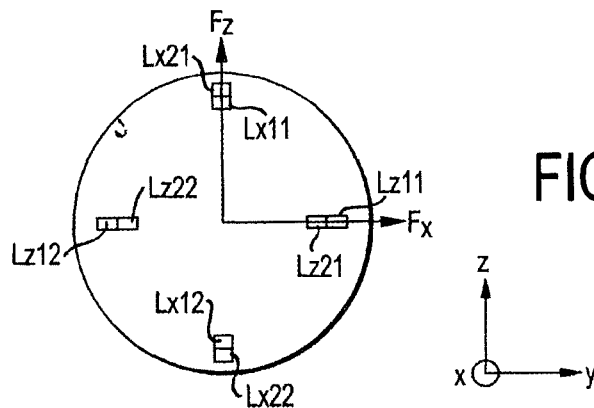
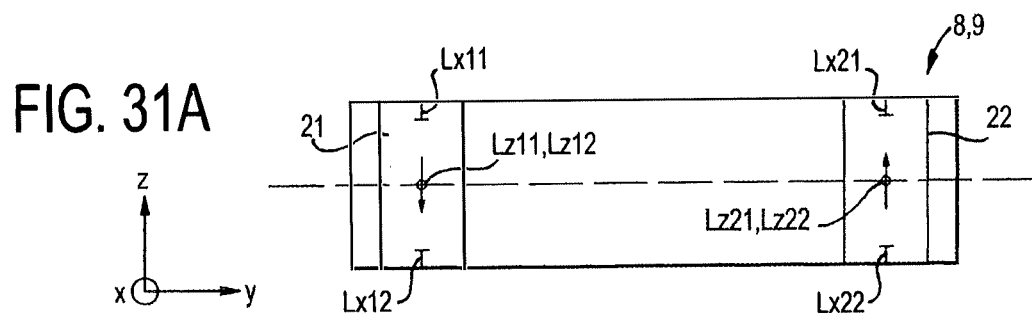
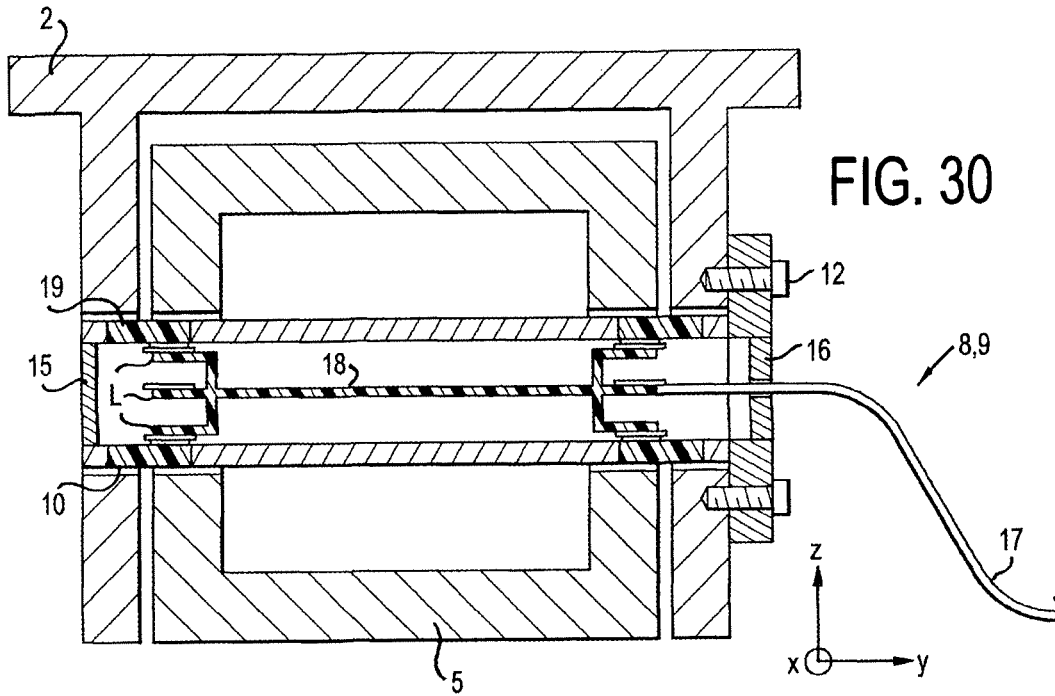


FIG. 29



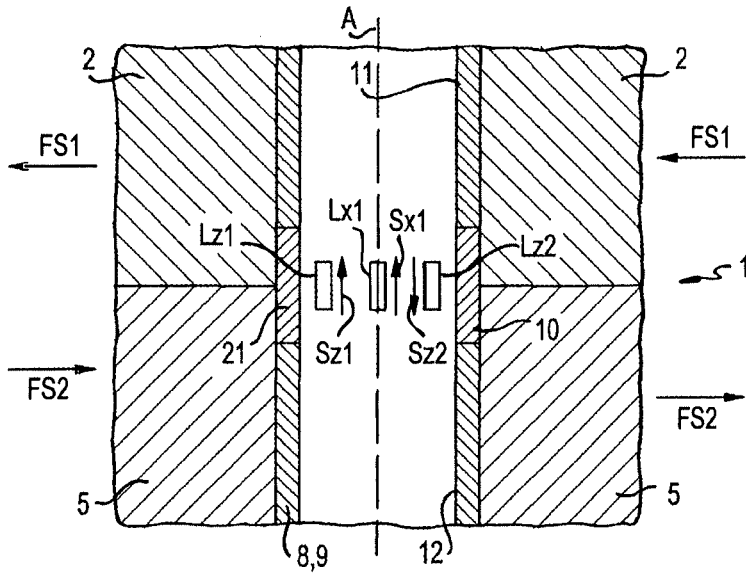


FIG. 32A

FIG. 32B

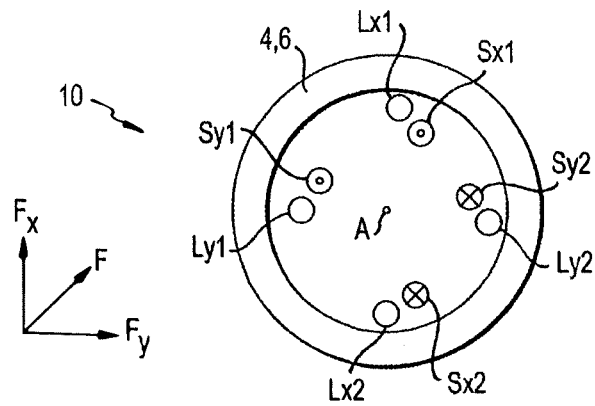
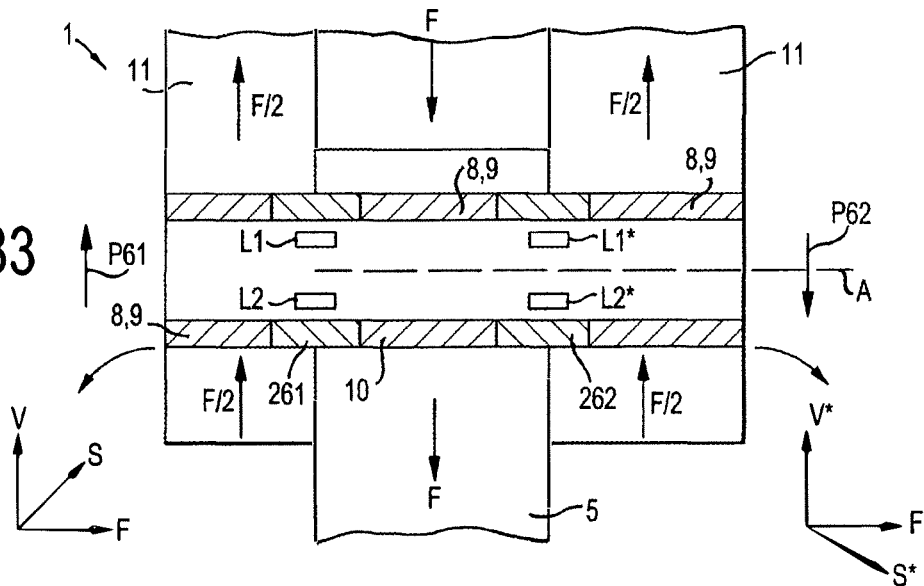


FIG. 33



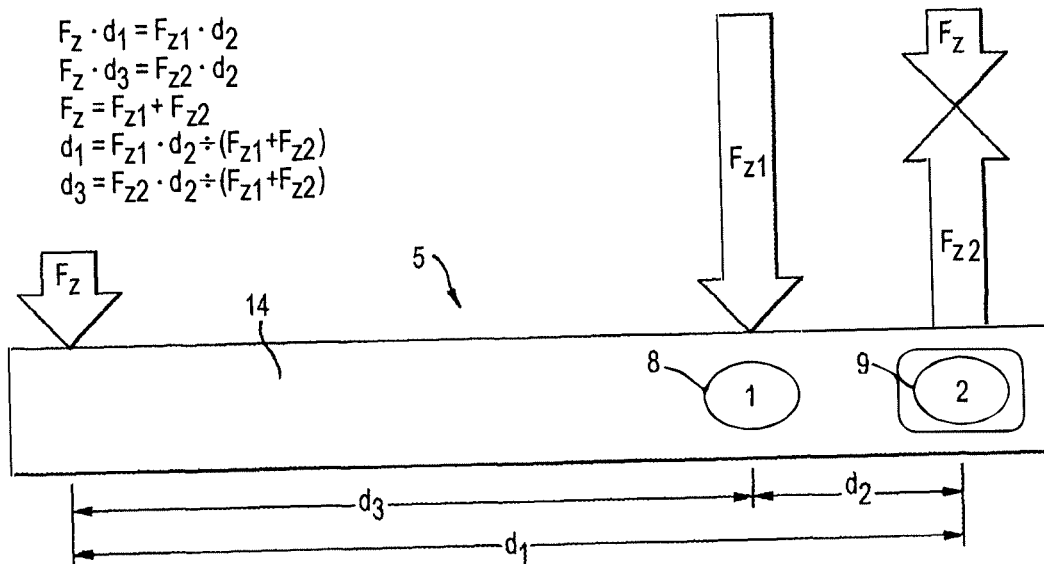


FIG. 34

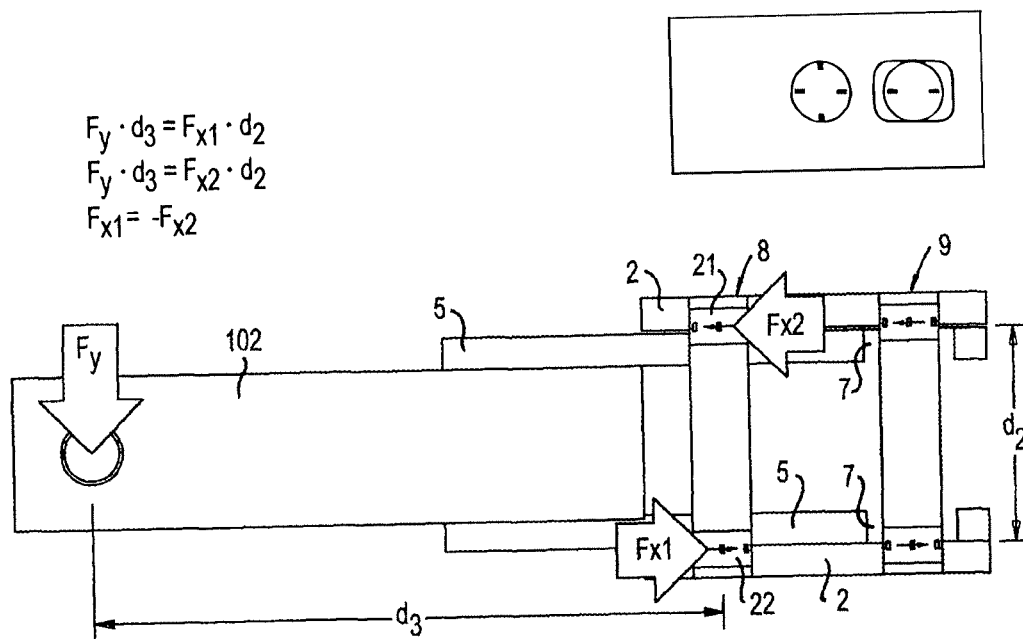
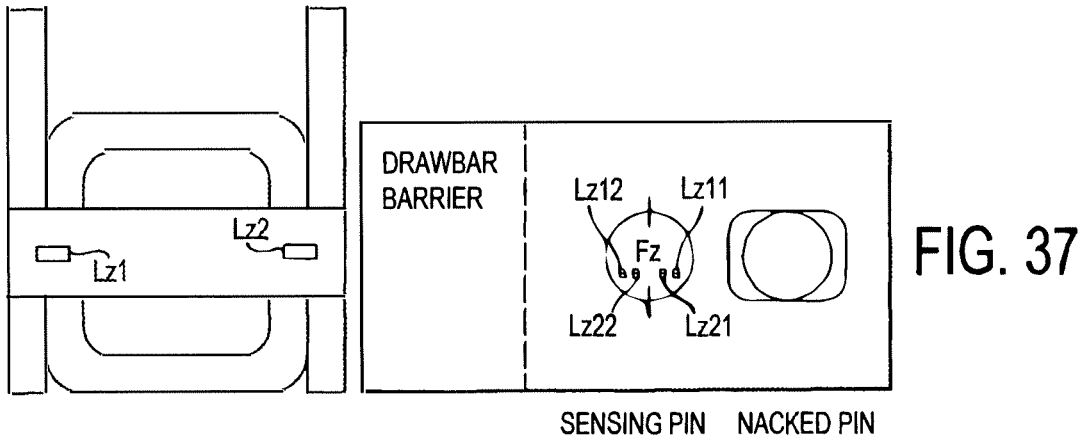
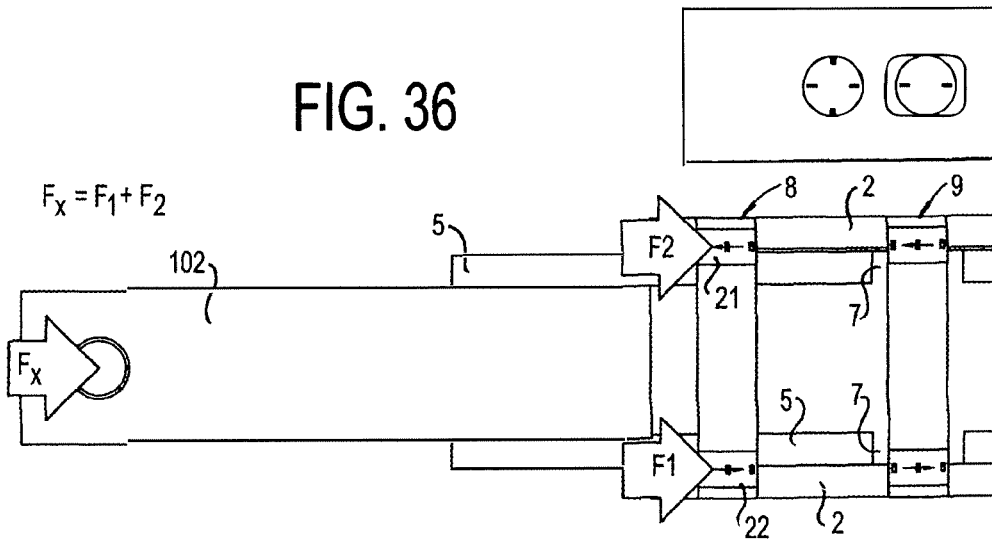
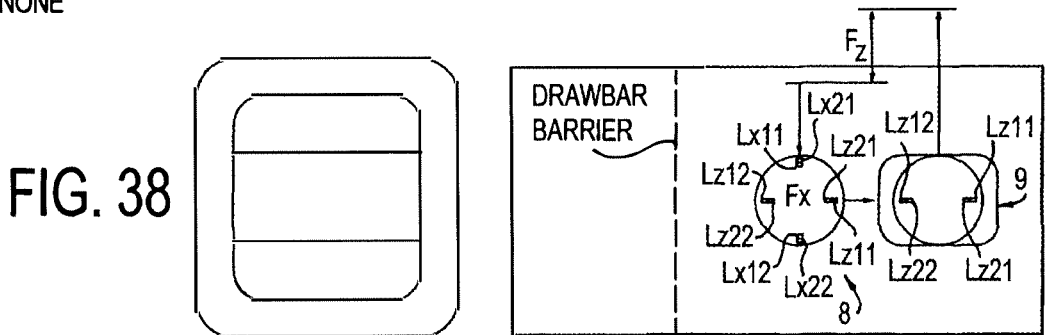


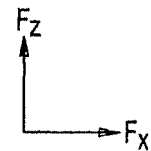
FIG. 35

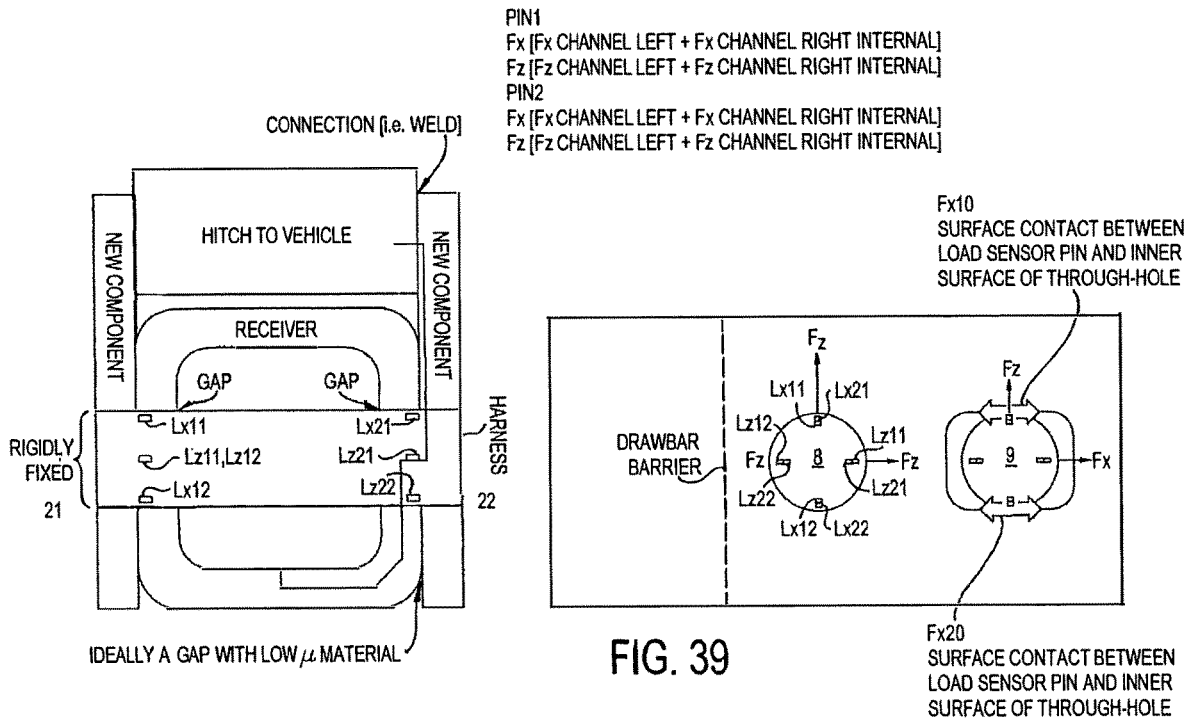


PIN1
 Fz [Fz CHANNEL LEFT + Fz CHANNEL RIGHT INTERNAL]
 PIN2
 NONE



PIN1
 Fx [Fx CHANNEL LEFT + Fx CHANNEL RIGHT INTERNAL]
 Fz [Fz CHANNEL LEFT + Fz CHANNEL RIGHT INTERNAL]
 PIN2
 Fz [Fz CHANNEL LEFT + Fz CHANNEL RIGHT INTERNAL]





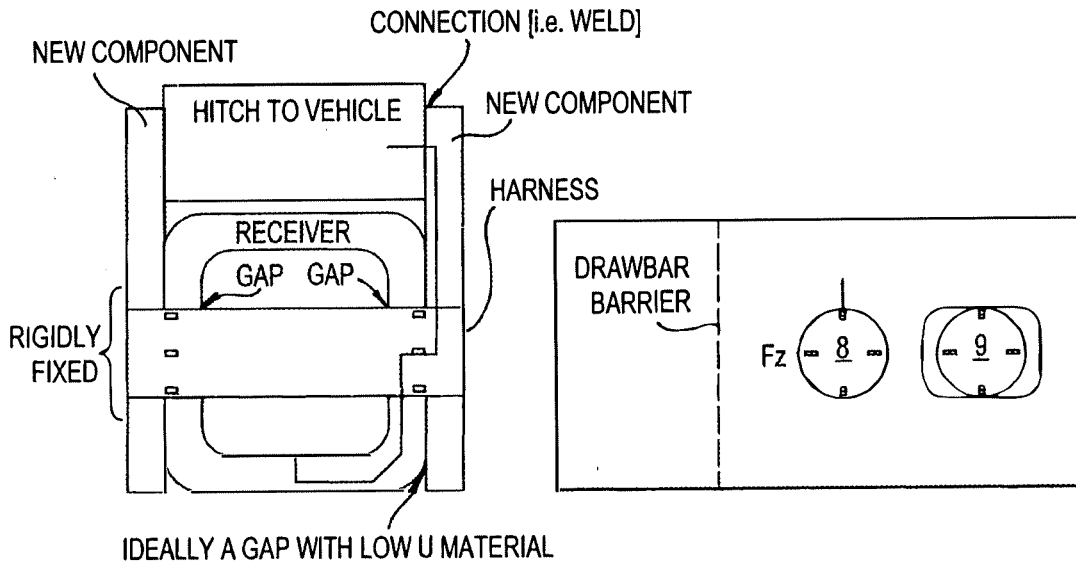


FIG. 40

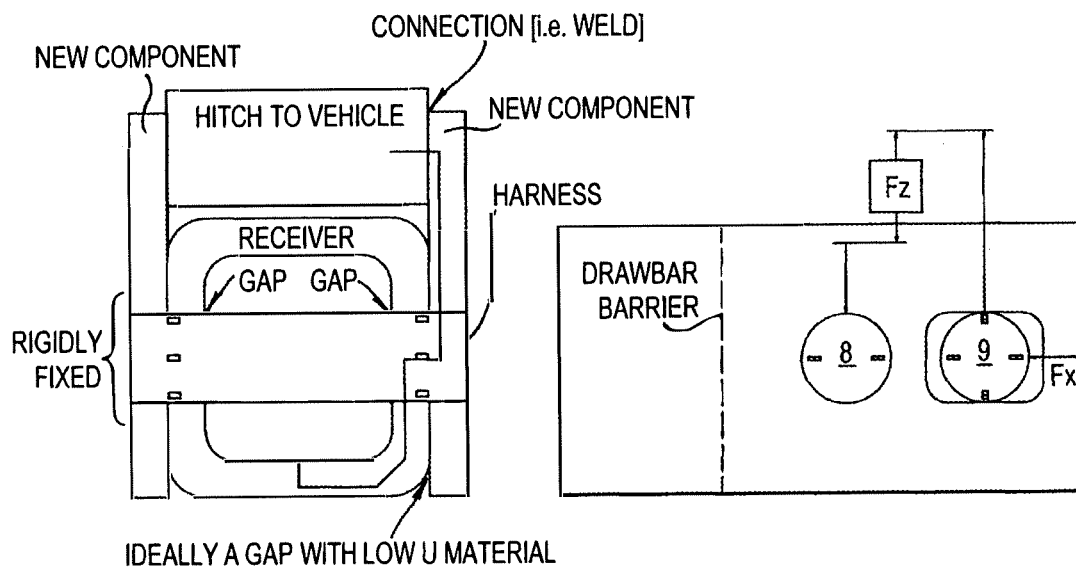


FIG. 41

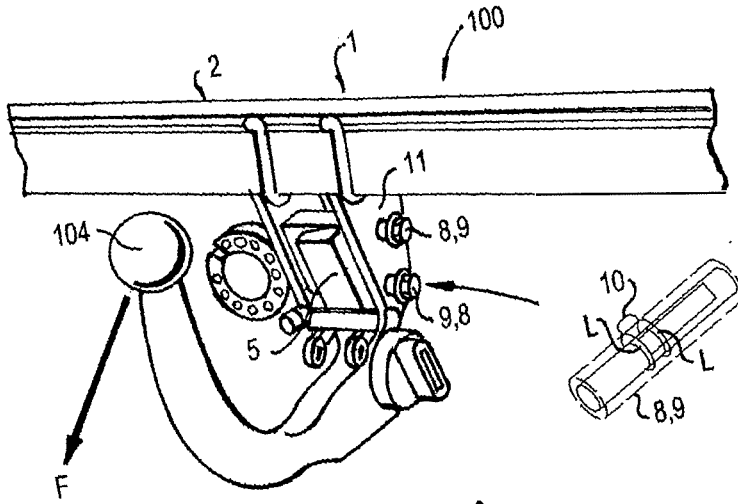


FIG. 42A

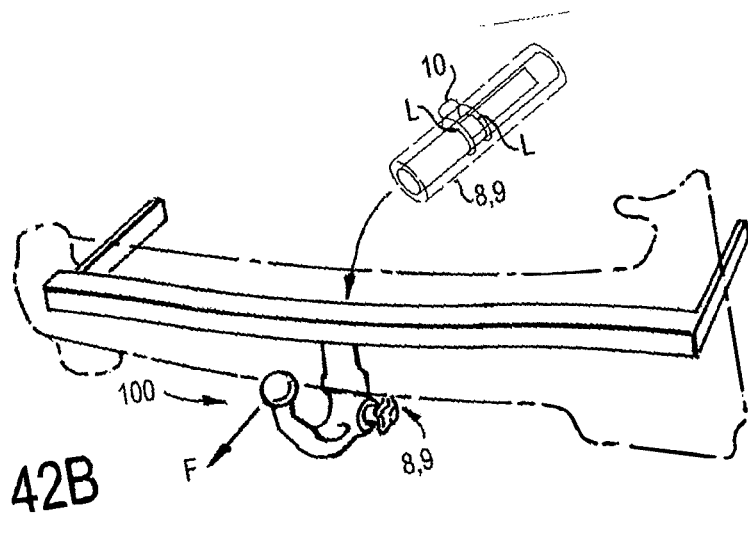
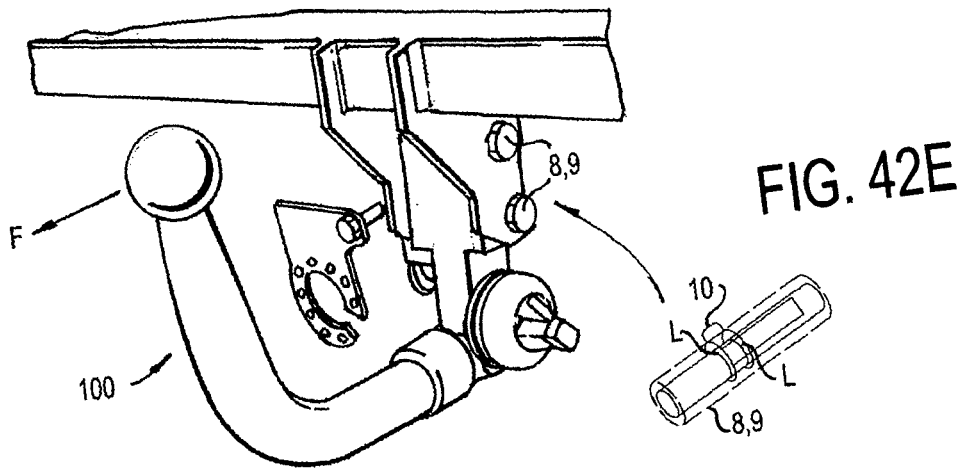
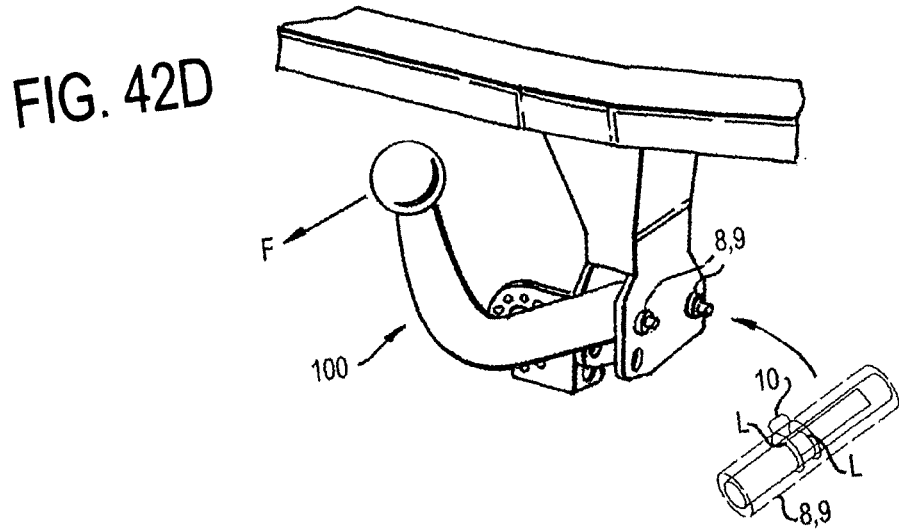
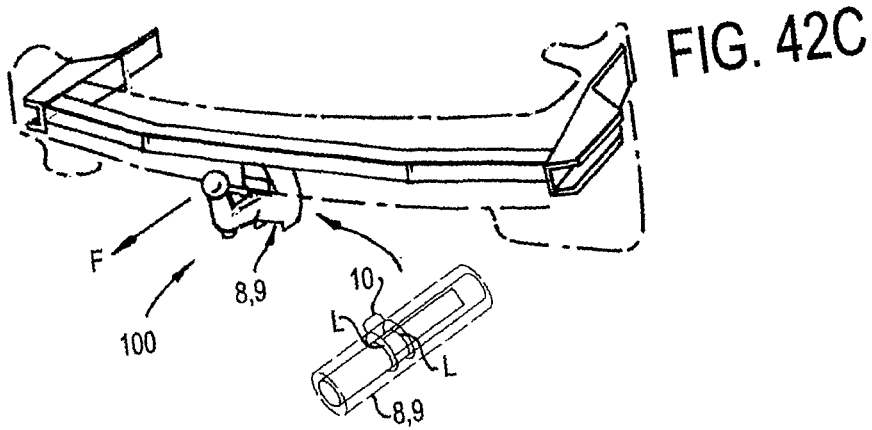
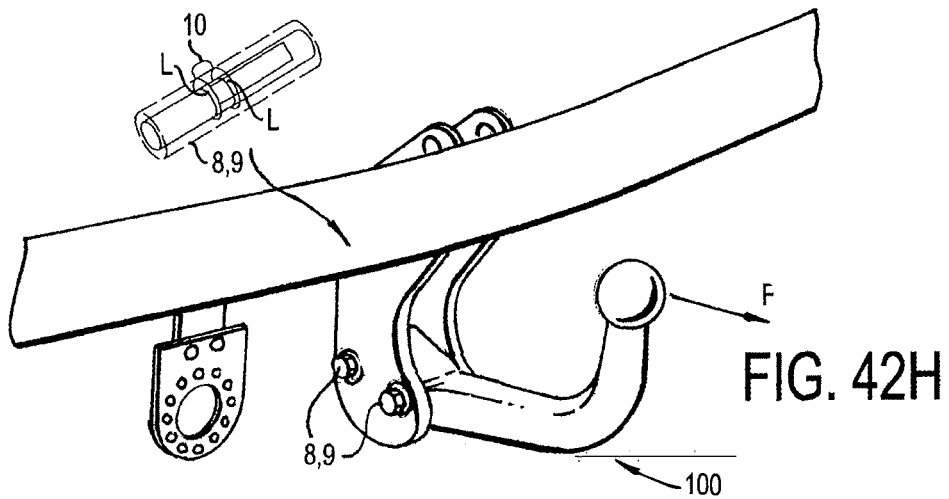
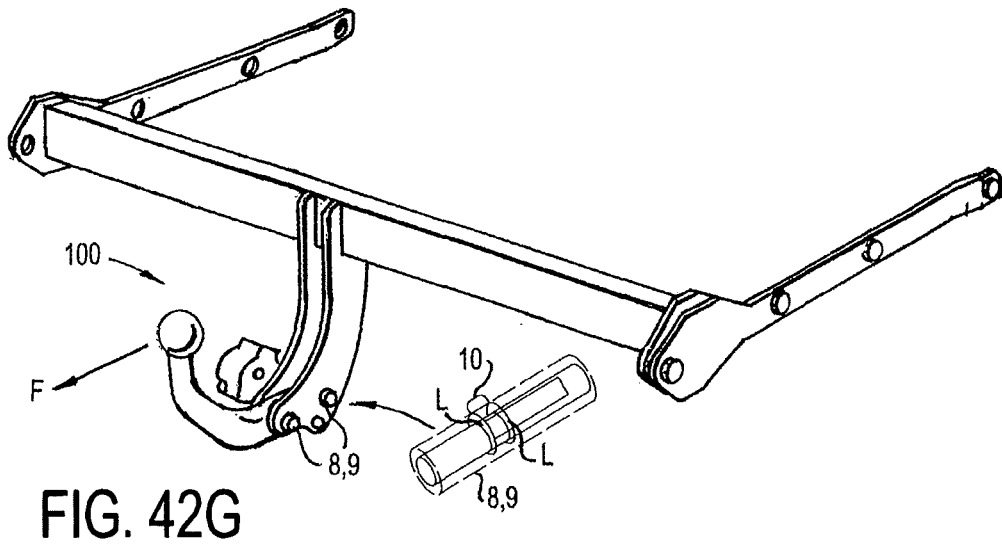
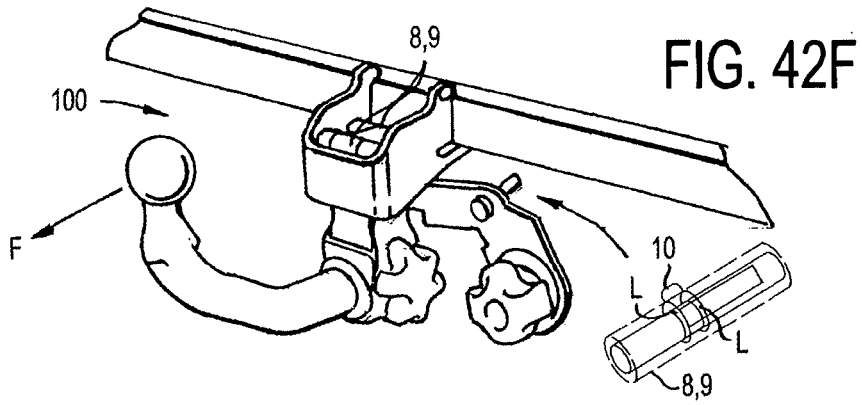


FIG. 42B





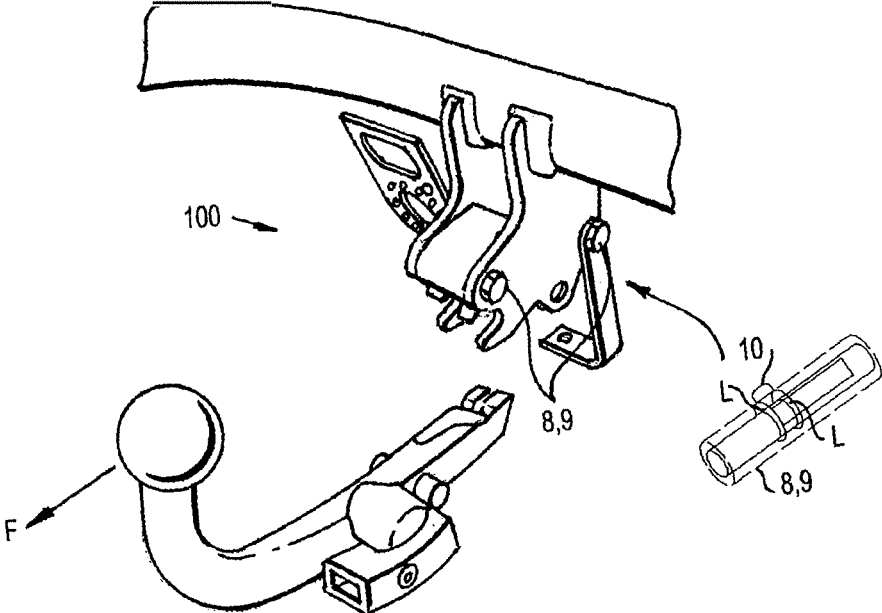


FIG. 42I

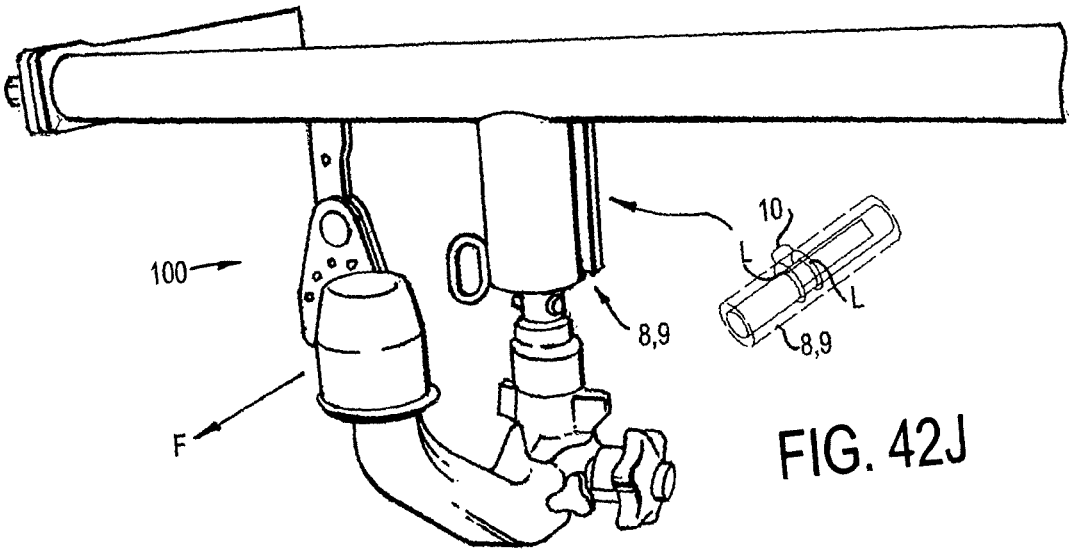
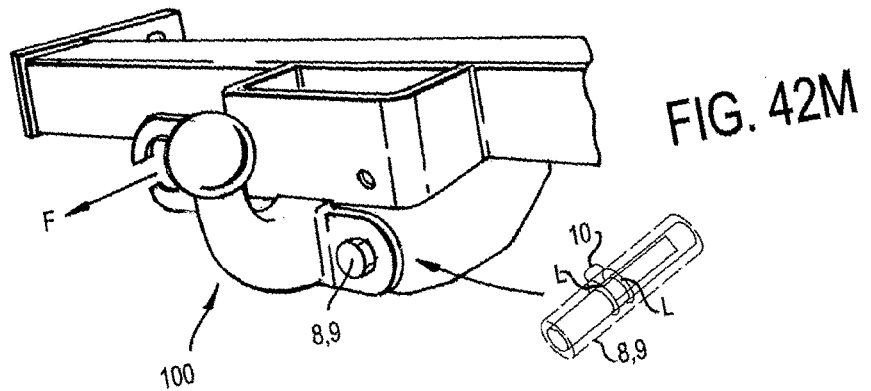
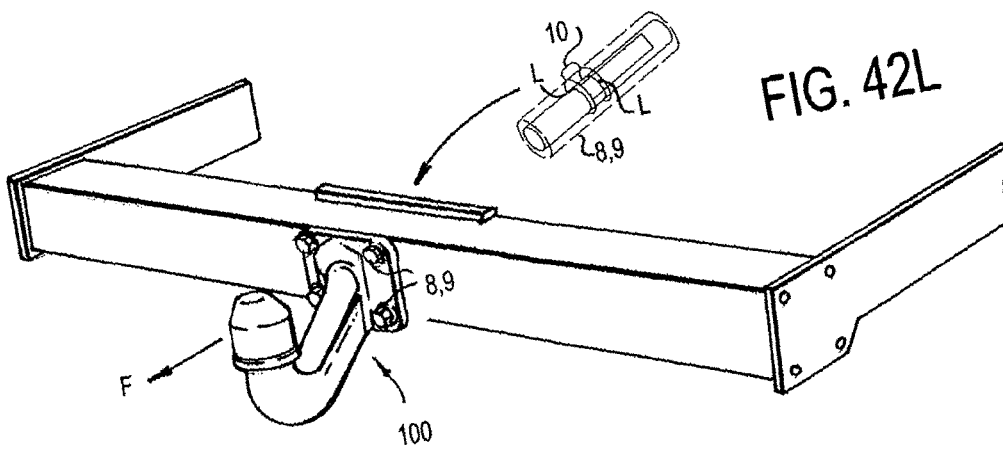
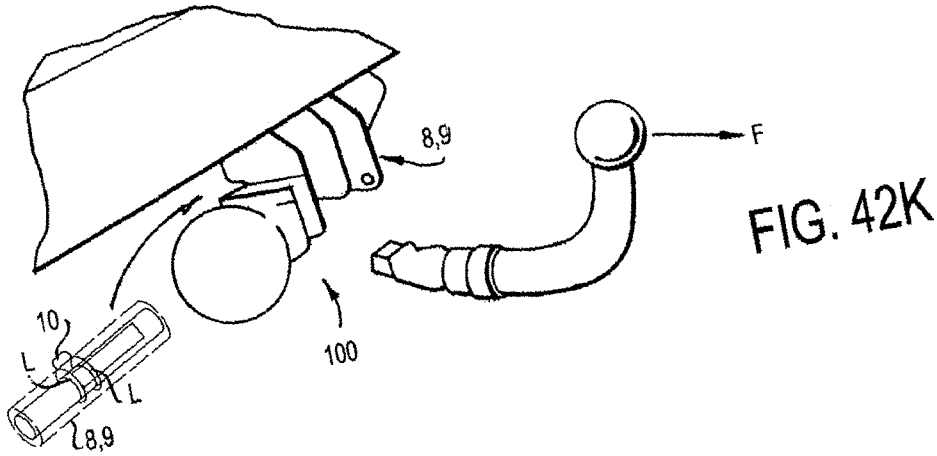
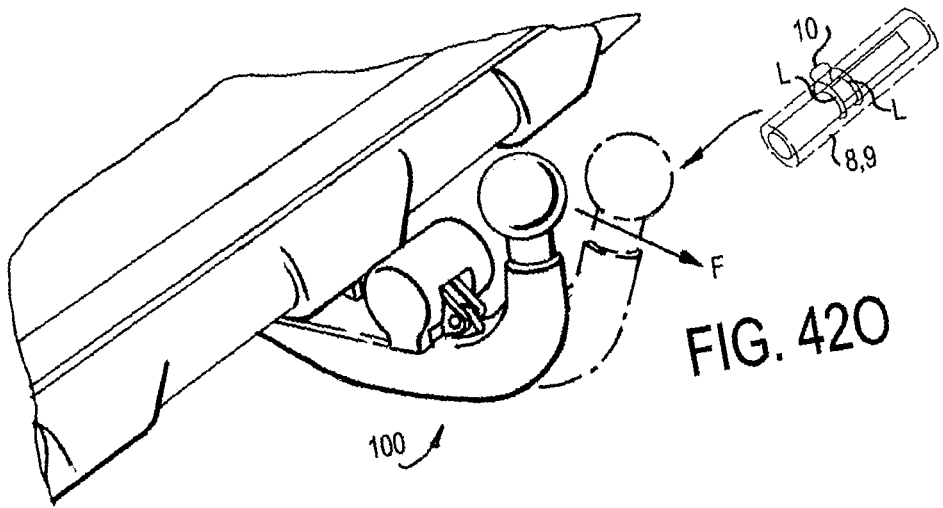
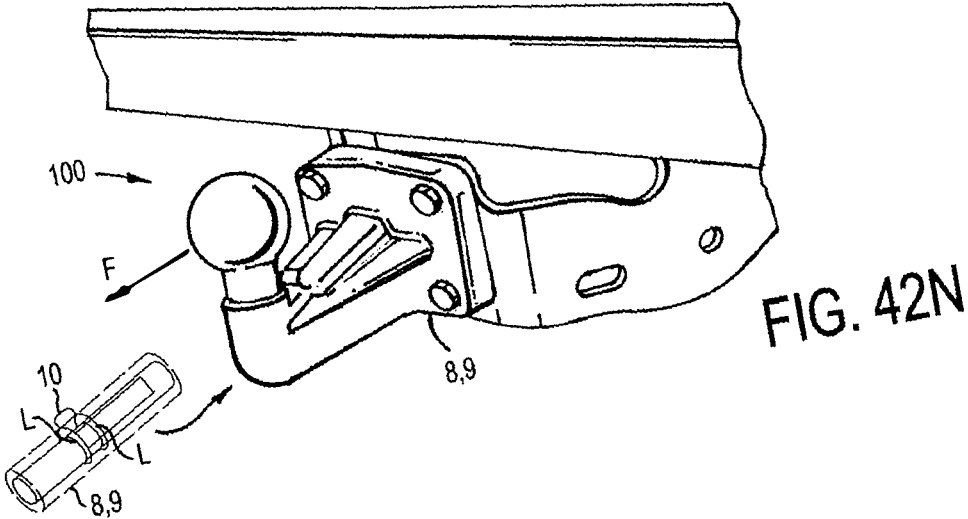


FIG. 42J





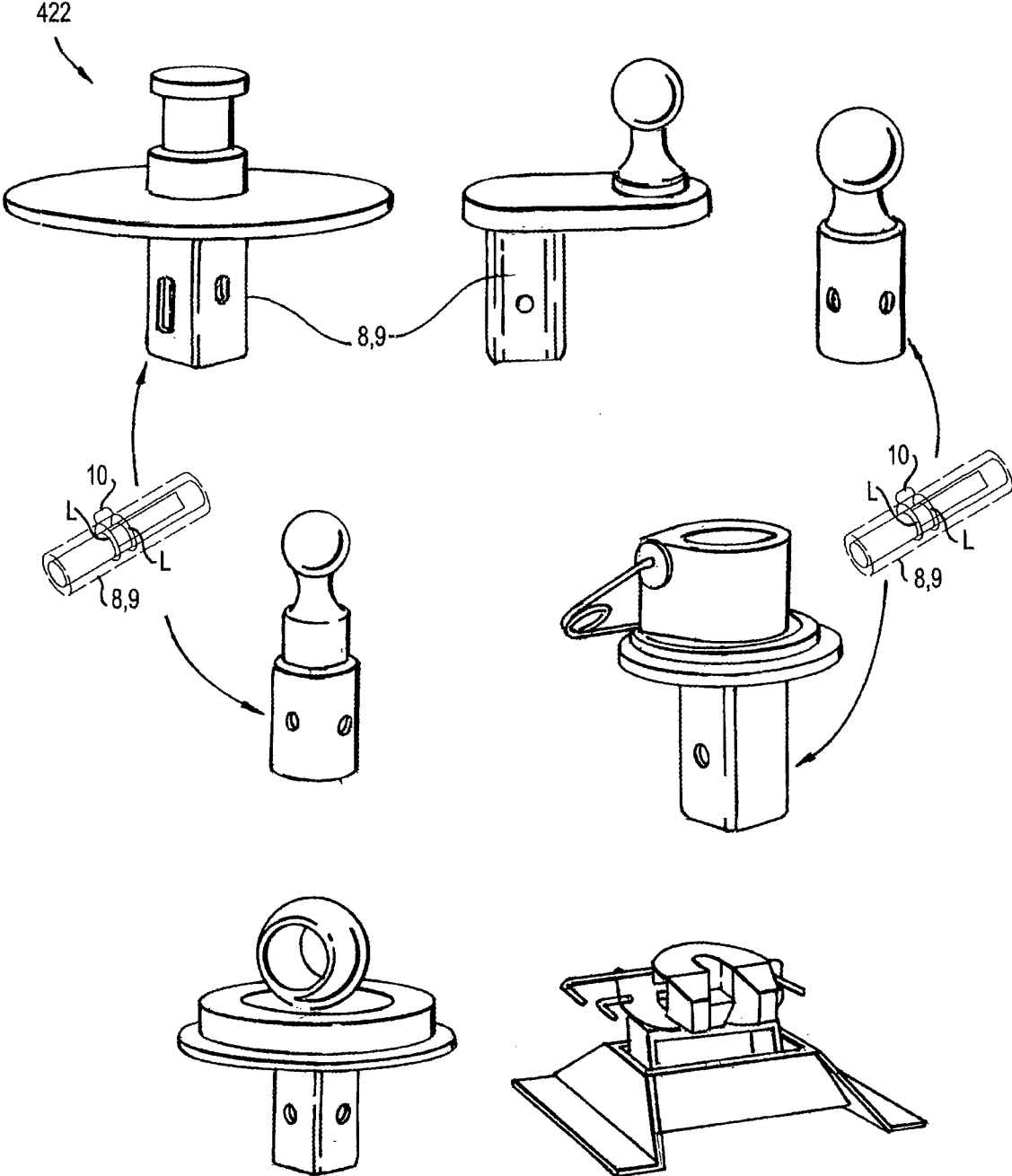
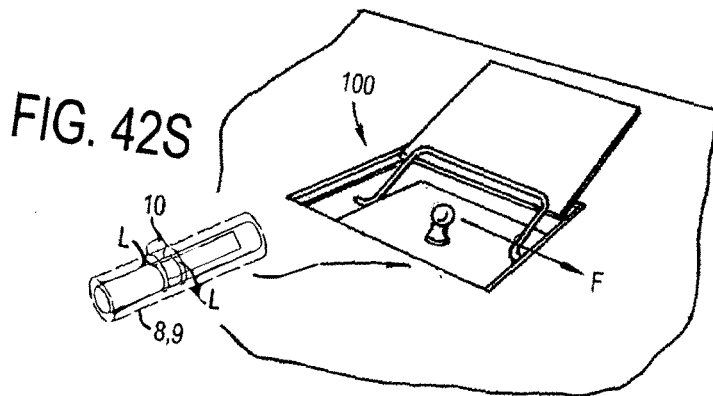
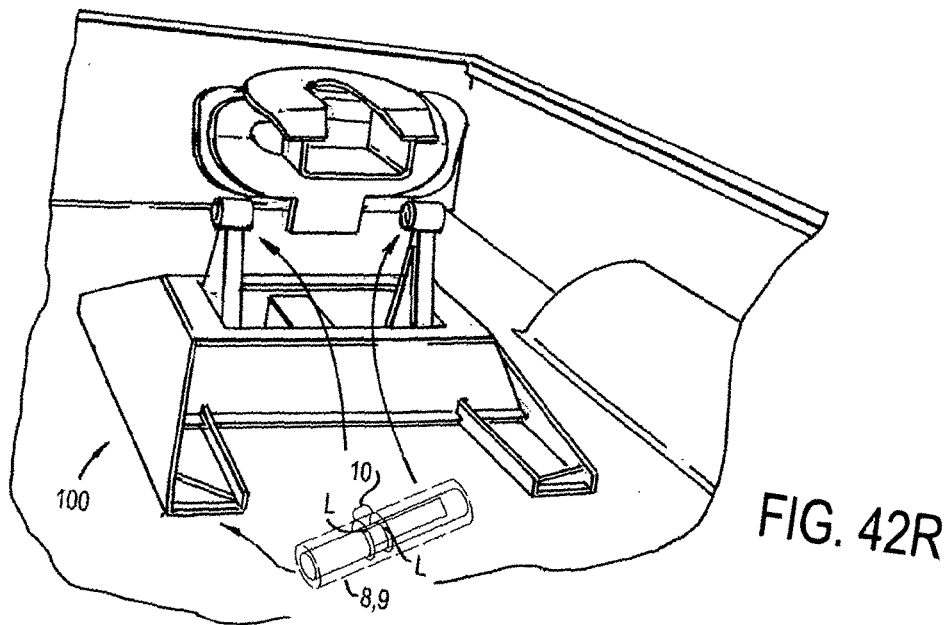
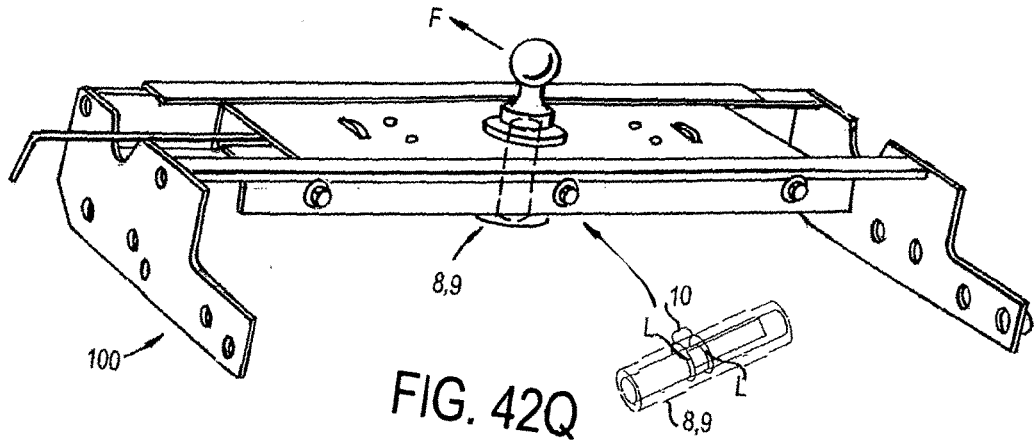


FIG. 42P



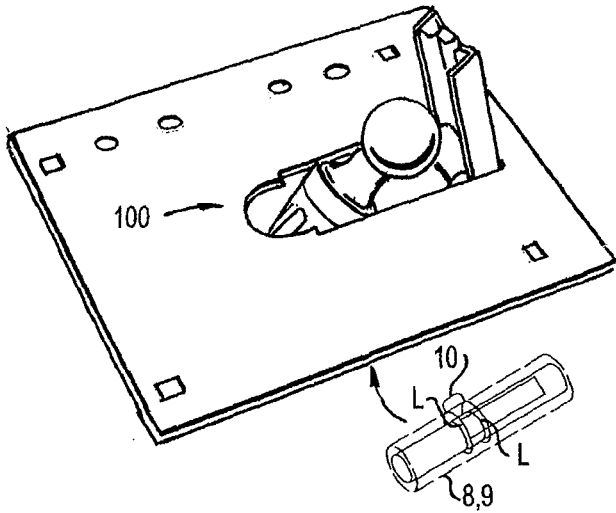


FIG. 42T

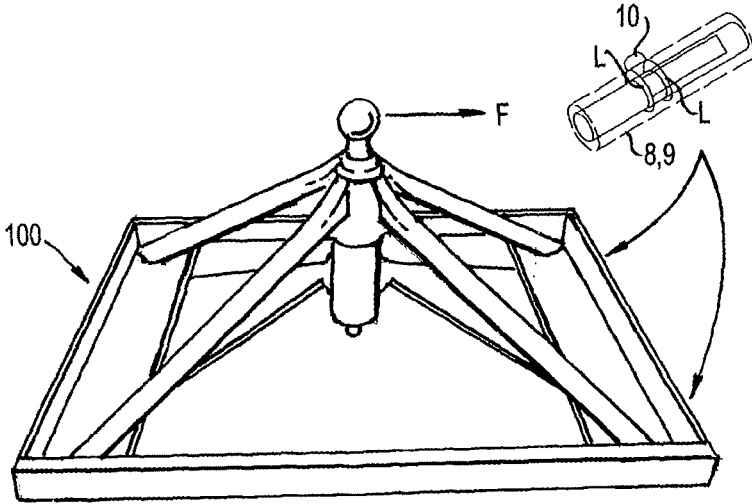


FIG. 42U

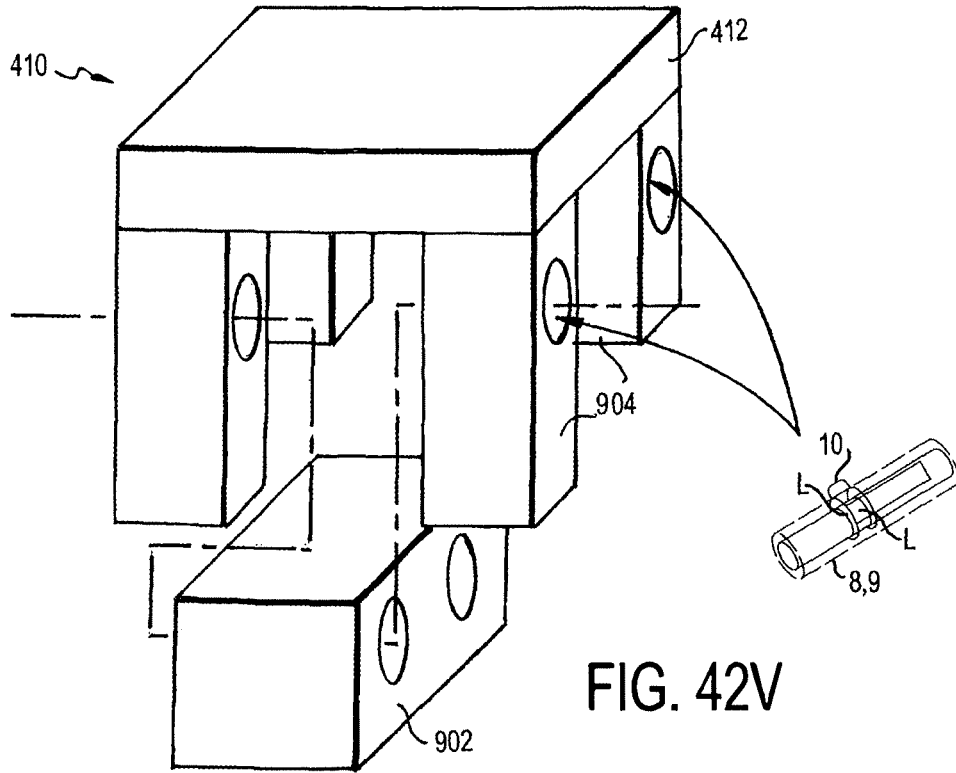


FIG. 42V

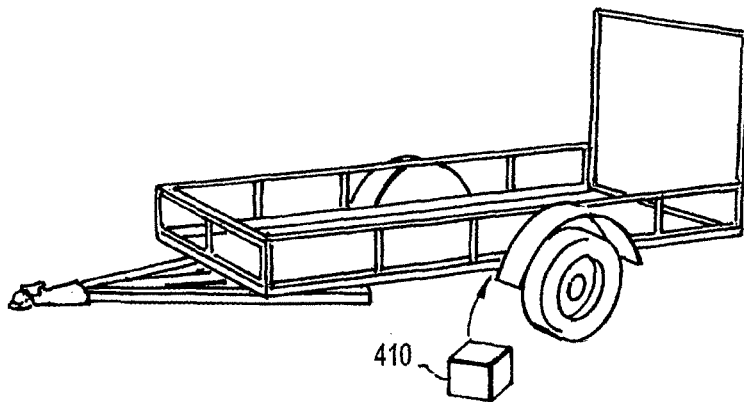
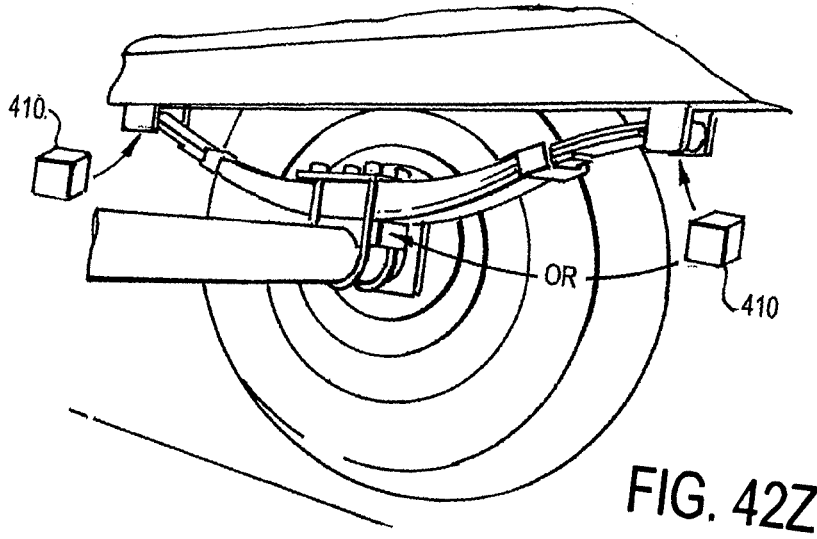
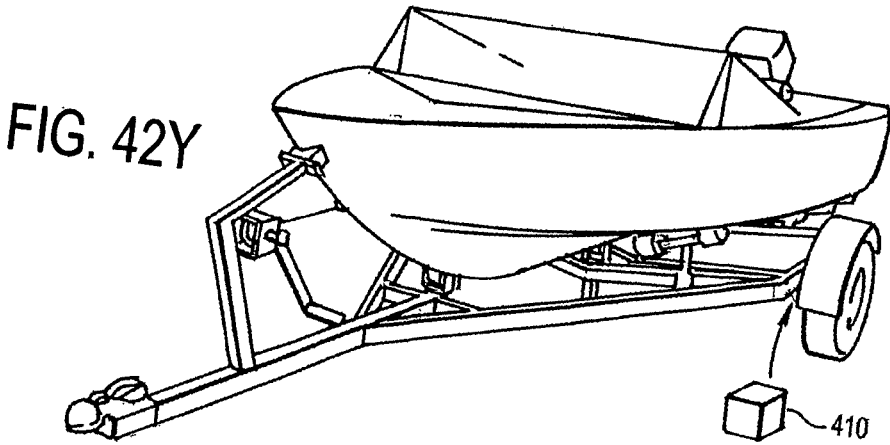
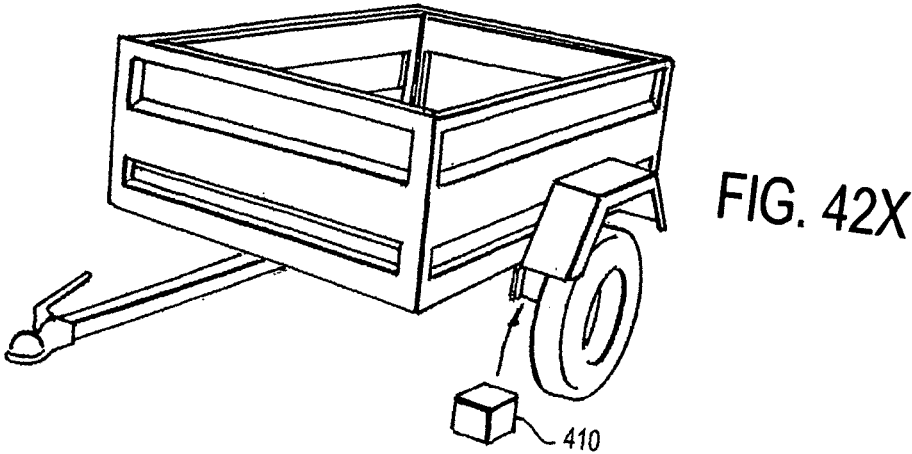


FIG. 42W



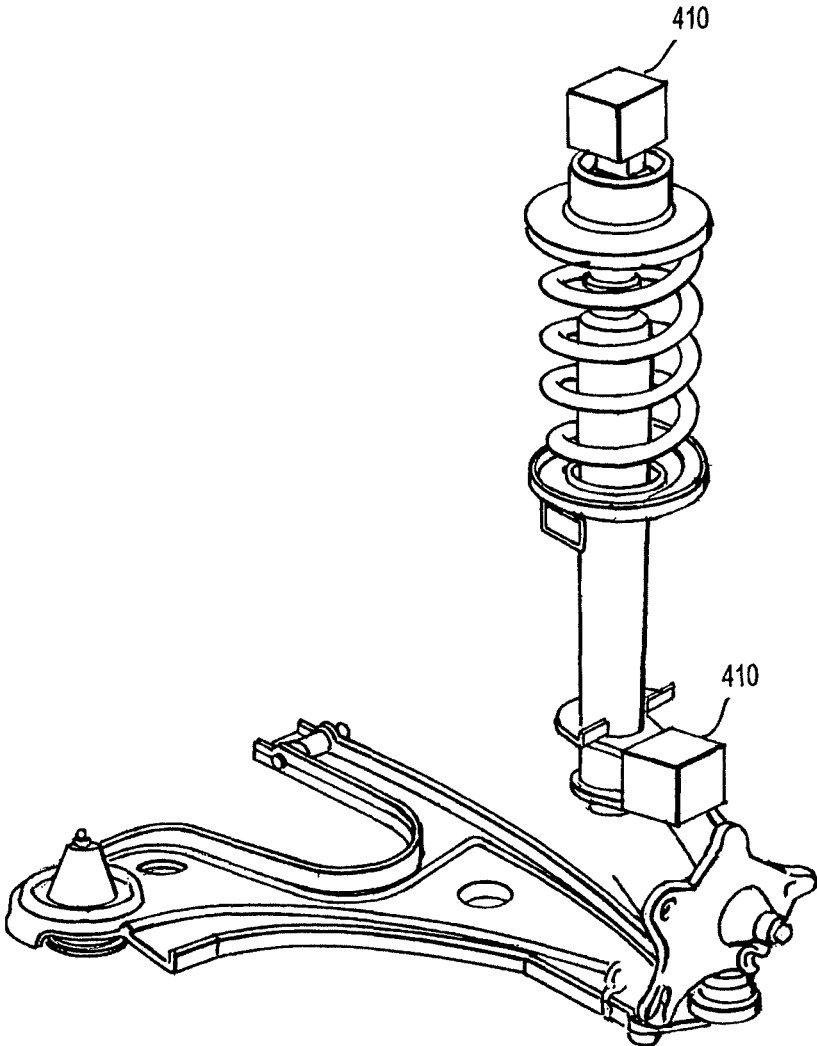


FIG. 42AA

TOWING SYSTEMS AND METHODS USING MAGNETIC FIELD SENSING

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application is a continuation application that is based on and claims the benefit of the filing date and disclosure of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 16/136,837, filed on Sep. 20, 2018, which is based on and claims the benefit of the respective filing dates and disclosures of U.S. Provisional Application No. 62/635,848, filed on Feb. 27, 2018, entitled “Magneto-elastic Based Sensor Assembly and Method”; U.S. Provisional Application No. 62/635,869, filed on Feb. 27, 2018, entitled “Tow Hitches With Magneto-elastic Sensing Devices and Methods”; U.S. Provisional Application No. 62/635,890, filed on Feb. 27, 2018, entitled “Towing System With Hitch Forces Sensing Method”; and U.S. Provisional Application No. 62/677,378, filed on May 29, 2018, entitled “Towing System Using Magnetic Field Sensing Method,” the contents of each of which are incorporated herein.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of Invention

[0002] The invention is related in general to systems and methods involving the use of magnetic field sensors and magneto-elastic devices for measuring a load and outputting a signal indicative of a load force dynamically applied to an object. The invention is also related to use of the force-sensing apparatus in connection with a vehicle-trailer hitch or tow coupling. The invention is also related to methods for determining a direction and magnitude of the force vector on the hitch or a particular hitch component.

Description of Related Art

[0003] Tow coupling devices are popular accessories for owners of passenger automobiles (cars and trucks) who tow trailers. These coupling devices may be purchased and installed in a new automobile, or purchased in the aftermarket and installed by owners after acquiring an automobile. The automotive and tow hitch industries classify trailer hitches according to various criteria. In one aspect, hitches are classified in one of Class 1-5. Each class of hitch includes associated real-world standards such as minimum force load requirements, including at least longitudinal tension, longitudinal compression, transverse thrust, vertical tension, and vertical compression.

[0004] In many trailer hitch use cases, strain gauges are used for sensing a force load on a hitch. Strain gauges, however, often require a structural weakening of the load-conducting elements. There is a need for load measurements without compromising the structural stability of the measuring device. This is especially true for tow couplings.

[0005] Furthermore, there is a strong demand for smart tow couplings, e.g., for systems providing at least the following: a load weight gauge (measuring the tongue load of a tow coupling), a tow load weight shift alert, an unsafe trailer load distribution alert, a vehicle limit notification, an automated trailer brake control (closed loop), a low/flat trailer tire notification, a check trailer brake notification, a closed loop braking control, a vehicle shift control, an engine control, and a stability control. These and other

functions require the measurement of tow loads and/or tongue loads at the tow coupling.

[0006] Prior art load measurement devices for tow couplings have significant shortcomings, e.g. the complexity of the measurement and control devices, and the costs of the sensor assembly. Thus, there is a need for a tow coupling apparatus that may be purchased and installed in an automobile that provides the above functions without weakening over time.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] In one aspect of the invention, an improved magneto-elastic based sensor assembly is provided to effectively measure stress and strain in systems having a portion, which is subject to a mechanic load. The invention also provides a method of determining a direction of a load vector acting on a magneto-elastic based sensor assembly.

[0008] In one aspect of the invention, a tow hitch assembly includes a hitch tube, a first part, a second part, a receiver tube, and first and second load sensor pins **8**, **9** connecting the first and second parts. The hitch tube is typically a longitudinally extending, round, oval, square, or other shape member for attaching to a vehicle, typically near the rear bumper of a passenger vehicle. Bolts or other fastening means may be used to attach the hitch tube to the vehicle.

[0009] The first part of the tow hitch assembly may be a bracket with two side flange portions having through-holes: first and second through-holes on one flange, and third and fourth through-holes on the other, such that the first and third through-holes are axially aligned with each other and the second and fourth through-holes are also axially aligned with each other.

[0010] The second part may include a receiver tube connected to a longitudinally extending middle adapter member that fits between the two flanges of the bracket when the hitch components are in an assembled state. In one aspect, the adapter may be configured to include a front portion that would be positioned in front of the hitch tube, and a back portion that would be positioned in back of the hitch tube, the front and the back portions each having a through-hole axially aligned with the through-holes on the bracket when the first and second parts are in an assembled state. In another aspect, the entirety of the adapter could be in front of the hitch tube, or behind the hitch tube, or in some other configuration.

[0011] In another aspect, the first and second load sensor pins **8**, **9** are configured to sense forces applied to the receiver tube and other components of the hitch assembly. One of the two load sensor pins **8**, **9** extends through the first and third through-holes of the bracket and one of the through-holes of the adapter, and the other pin extends through the second and fourth through-holes of the bracket and a different through-hole of the adapter to secure the first and second parts together.

[0012] In another aspect, there is a gap of about 0.5 mm between the top of the middle adapter member and the base portion of the bracket, and the thickness of the base portion of the bracket in the configuration shown is 8 mm. Alternatively, the thickness of the base portion of the bracket is about 10 mm, and the gap is about 5 mm between the top of the middle adapter member and the base portion of the bracket. Press-fit bushings could be used, having a predetermined radial thickness inserted into the axially-aligned through-holes of the bracket.

[0013] In another aspect, during use of the assembled tow hitch, a force is applied to the proximate end of a drawbar and transmitted to the front pin. The output signals from magnetic field sensors associated with the front pin may be received in a suitable software algorithm, for example one that is embedded on a circuit board having a suitable processor located inside the front pin. The receive output signals from the sensors, which may be indicative of the magnetic field/flux exhibited by the front pin magneto-elastic active regions, may be used to determine the forces.

[0014] In U.S. Pat. No. 9,347,845, owned by Methode Electronics, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety, a magneto-elastic sensor having a longitudinally extending shaft like member with at least one magneto-elastically active region and a magnetic field sensor device is described. The longitudinally extending shaft like member is subject to a load introducing mechanic stress in the member. The at least one magneto-elastically active region is directly or indirectly attached to the shaft like member. However, the at least one magneto-elastically active region may also form a part of the member. The magneto-elastically active region is arranged in such a manner that the mechanic stress is transmitted to the active region. The region includes at least one magnetically polarized region such that the magnetic polarization becomes increasingly helically shaped as the applied stress increases. The magnetic field sensor means or device is arranged proximate the at least one magneto-elastically active region. The magnetic field sensor means/device is further configured for outputting a signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux, which emanates from the magnetically polarized region. The sensor may be a magnetic sensor device with at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor. This direction sensitive magnetic field sensor is configured for determination of a shear stress and/or of a tensile or compressive stress. In particular, the direction sensitive magnetic field sensor is arranged to have a predetermined and fixed spatial coordination with the member.

[0015] One object of the invention described herein, which is also described in EP17162429.9, owned by Methode Electronics and incorporated herein by reference in its entirety, is a sensor assembly for force sensing, the force sensor being associated with a vehicle hitch assembly. The improved magneto-elastic based sensor assembly is useful for effectively measuring stress and strain in systems having a portion, which is subject to a mechanic load. The invention provides a method of determining a direction of a load vector acting on a magneto-elastic based sensor assembly.

[0016] According to an aspect of the invention, a sensor assembly for force sensing can include a first portion having a first and a second through-hole. The sensor assembly can further include a second portion having a third and a fourth through-hole. The third and the fourth through-hole can be positioned in correspondence to the first and the second through-holes.

[0017] The sensor assembly can further include a first pin and a second pin. The first pin can be arranged such that it extends through the first and the third through-hole and the second pin can be arranged such that it extends through the second and the fourth through-hole, so as to couple the first portion to the second portion. At least one out of the first and the second pin can include at least one magneto-elastically active region that may directly or indirectly be attached to or form a part of the pin in such a manner that mechanic stress

on the pin is transmitted to the magneto-elastically active region. The magneto-elastically active region can include at least one magnetically polarized region such that a polarization of the magnetically polarized region may become increasingly helically shaped as the applied stress increases.

[0018] The sensor assembly can further include a magnetic field sensor means or device which may be arranged proximate the at least one magneto-elastically active region. The magnetic field sensor means/device may be configured to output a signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux which may emanate from the magnetically polarized region. The magnetic field sensor means/device may comprise at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor which may be configured to determine a shear force in at least one direction. The at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor may in particular be arranged to have a predetermined and fixed spatial coordination with the pin, wherein this pin may at least be partially hollow. The at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor may be arranged inside an interior of this pin.

[0019] By means of the sensor assembly, stress which is applied to a pin caused by a mechanic load can effectively be measured. The sensor assembly according to aspects of the invention thus described overcomes the drawback of the prior art solutions. In particular, the sensor assembly does not tend to drift with respect to the measurement values and is less error-prone.

[0020] According to another aspect of the invention, at least one out of the first and the second pin of the sensor assembly can comprise at least one X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, which can be configured to detect a force component F_{x1} in a longitudinal direction X, and/or at least one Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, which can be configured to detect a force component F_{z1} in a vertical direction Z. The longitudinal direction X can be defined by a direction of longitudinal extension of the second portion. The vertical direction Z can be substantially perpendicular to the longitudinal direction X and substantially perpendicular to the transversal direction Y of longitudinal extension of the at least one pin.

[0021] According to another aspect of the invention, the first through-hole and the third through-hole of the sensor assembly can be configured such that they encompass the first pin in a positive-fitting manner. A positive-fitting manner of the fitting allows the pin to be substantially rigidly fixed to the first portion and the second portion by the first and the third through-hole. This means that the pin has almost no play inside the first and third through-hole and that the accuracy of the force measurement is advantageously increased compared to a configuration in which the first pin has play inside the first and the third through-hole.

[0022] According to another aspect of the invention, the first pin may be cryogenically treated, such as by subjecting the entire first pin to liquefied nitrogen, thereby causing a reduction in the cross-section dimension of the pin. After super-cooling the first pin, it may be positioned in the first and third through-holes and allowed to return to ambient temperature. As the material in the pin warms up to ambient temperature, the cross-section dimension will increase until the first pin is substantially rigidly fixed in the first and third through-holes.

[0023] According to another aspect, the second pin of the sensor assembly may be encompassed by the second through-hole in a positive-fitting manner and the fourth

through-hole may be configured such that the second pin may have one additional degree of freedom of movement within the fourth through-hole. The additional degree of freedom of movement allows the second pin to be insensitive with respect to shear forces acting in the direction of the additional degree of freedom of movement. This means that the determination of the shear force along this direction can advantageously be simplified since the shear effect occurs exclusively on the first pin.

[0024] According to another aspect, the second pin, like the first pin, may be cryogenically treated, such as by subjecting the entire first pin to liquefied nitrogen, thereby causing a reduction in the cross-section dimension of the pin. After super-cooling the second pin, it may be positioned in the second and fourth through-holes and allowed to return to ambient temperature. As the material in the second pin warms up to ambient temperature, the cross-section dimension will increase until the second pin is substantially rigidly fixed in the second and fourth through-holes with the additional degree of freedom of movement noted above.

[0025] According to another aspect, the additional degree of freedom of movement may extend in the longitudinal direction X. Since the additional degree of freedom of movement corresponds to the longitudinal direction X, the determination of the shear force along this direction can advantageously be simplified.

[0026] According to another aspect, the first and/or the second pin of the sensor assembly can include a first magneto-elastically active region and a second magneto-elastically active region. The first and the second magneto-elastically active regions may be directly or indirectly attached to or form parts of the pin in such a manner that mechanic stress may be transmitted to the magneto-elastically active regions. Each magneto-elastically active region can include a magnetically polarized region. Particularly, the magnetic polarization of the first magneto-elastically active region and the magnetic polarization of the second magneto-elastically active region may be substantially opposite to each other. The magnetic field sensor means/device can include at least one first direction sensitive magnetic field sensor which may be arranged approximate the first magneto-elastically active region. The magnetic field sensor means/device may be configured to output a first signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux which may emanate from the first magneto-elastically active region. The magnetic field sensor means/device may include at least one second direction sensitive magnetic field sensor which may be arranged approximate the second magneto-elastically active region. The magnetic field sensor means/device may be configured to output a second signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux which may emanate from the second magneto-elastically active region. This way, the shear force can advantageously be determined in two opposing directions thereby improving the quality of the determination of the shear force. This “vice versa” configuration of the magnetic field sensors enables the shear directions to be determined by the magneto-elastically active regions. For example, the directions may be distinguishable, if the measurement data, which is acquired from the first direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and the second direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, is differentially processed.

[0027] The differential evaluation of the signals advantageously doubles the signal, which is correlated with the applied stress. Because the polarization of the first and

second magneto-elastically active region is opposite to each other, theoretically possible external fields may be compensated. The sensor assembly according to this embodiment may be more sensitive and less susceptible to errors.

[0028] According to another aspect of the invention, the first and/or the second pin of the sensor assembly can include at least one first X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and/or at least one second X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and/or at least one Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and/or at least one second Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor. The at least one X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor may be configured to detect a force component Fx1 in the first magneto-elastically active region in the longitudinal direction X of the second portion. The at least one second X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor may be configured to detect a force component Fx2 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the longitudinal direction X of the second portion. The at least one Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor may be configured to detect a force component Fz1 in the first magneto-elastically active region in the vertical direction Z. The at least one second Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor may be configured to detect a force component Fz2 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the vertical direction Z. Advantageously, the shear force can be determined in different directions being perpendicularly aligned with respect to each other.

[0029] According to another aspect, the first pin of the sensor assembly can include the at least one Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and the at least one second Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor. Advantageously, the first pin can be configured to exclusively react on a shear force acting along the Z-direction.

[0030] According to still another aspect of the above invention, the first pin of the sensor assembly can include the at least one first X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, the at least one second X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, the at least one first Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and the at least one second Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and the second pin of the sensor assembly can comprise the at least one Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and the at least one second Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor. Advantageously, the first pin can be configured to exclusively react on the shear effect along the X-direction which simplifies the shear force evaluation, wherein the shear force along the vertical Z-direction is acting on both load sensor pins **8, 9**.

[0031] According to another aspect, the first pin of the sensor assembly can include the at least one first X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, the at least one second X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, the at least one first Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and the at least one second Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, and the second pin of the sensor assembly can include the at least one first X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, the at least one second X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor, the at least one first Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and the at least one second Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor. This way, both load sensor pins **8, 9** are sensitive to all shear forces along the vertical Z-direction as well as along the longitudinal X-direction. The first and the second pin advantageously can detect the different components of the shear force at different positions of the system.

[0032] The magnetic field sensor means/device may be configured for determination of a first component and a second component of the load, which is applied to the pin. In particular, the at least one first X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and the at least one second X-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor can form a first group of sensors and the at least one first Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor and the at least one second Z-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor can form a second group of sensors. The first group of sensors is suitable for determination of a load component, which is directed along the X-axis. The second group of sensors senses a component of the load, which is substantially perpendicular to the first component along the Z-direction. Consequently, the direction and the value of the stress or force, which is applied to the load sensor pins **8, 9**, may be determined from said components in this coordinate system.

[0033] According to another aspect, the second portion of the sensor assembly can comprise a center wall which may extend in the longitudinal direction X and the vertical direction Z. The third and the fourth through-hole may also extend through the center wall. Advantageously, the center wall allows the first portion to be effectively affected by the shear force at an additional point of action.

[0034] According to another aspect, the first and/or the second pin of the sensor assembly may be fixedly attached in a predetermined manner to the first portion. The first and/or the second pin can advantageously be fixedly attached in all six degrees of freedom. This way, the determination of the shear forces is effectively possible since the load sensor pins **8, 9** do not have play inside the through-holes of the first portion.

[0035] According to another aspect, the first portion of the sensor assembly can have a yoke-like shape. The yoke legs of the first portion can comprise the first and the second through-holes. The second portion of the sensor assembly can have a tubular shape. The side walls of the second portion can comprise the third and fourth through-holes. The direction sensitive magnetic field sensor(s) may be configured to detect force components of shear forces introduced into the load sensor pins **8, 9** by the first portion and the second portion. Advantageously, a yoke-like shape of the first portion and a tubular shape of the second portion allow the sensor assembly to be implemented in an elongated joint connection of two objects, whereas the load sensor pins **8, 9** are arranged in the through-holes and connect both objects.

[0036] According to another aspect, the first portion of the sensor assembly can have a yoke-like shape. The yoke legs of the first portion can comprise the first and the second through-holes. The center wall can comprise the third and fourth through-holes. The direction sensitive magnetic field sensor(s) may be configured to detect force components of shear forces introduced into the load sensor pins **8, 9** by the first portion and the second portion. In particular, the side walls of the second portion can comprise through-holes which may be larger than the third and the fourth through-holes such that the shear forces may be introduced into the load sensor load sensor pins **8, 9** by abutment surfaces of the first and the second through-holes in the yoke legs and abutment surfaces of the third and the fourth through-holes in the center wall. The abutment surfaces allow the transmission of power between the first portion and the second portion to be configured in an advantageous manner.

[0037] According to another aspect, a tow coupling can comprise a sensor assembly wherein the first portion is a hitch assembly that may be configured to be attached to a car chassis and wherein the second portion may be a receiving tube which may be configured to receive a drawbar, alternatively a hitch bar or a ball mount of the tow coupling. Advantageously, the sensor assembly is configured to detect the forces of a tow coupling of an automobile, which may be part of a land based on-road or off-road vehicle.

[0038] According to another aspect, the first portion of the sensor assembly may be a supporting yoke having two yoke legs. The yoke legs may comprise recesses which are aligned in correspondence to each other and which represent the first and the second through-holes of the first portion.

[0039] According to another aspect, the first portion of the sensor assembly may be a supporting yoke having four yoke legs. The yoke legs may comprise recesses which are aligned in correspondence to each other and which represent the first and the second through-holes of the first portion.

[0040] According to another aspect, the sensor assembly dispenses with a mechanical linkage or connection between the magnetic field sensor means and the second portion. This eliminates sources of error, which result from mechanic failure of this connection. The sensor assembly reliably operates even under extreme operating conditions. The drift of the measurement values during long term measurement is reduced. The sensor assembly according to aspects of the invention is versatile in that it may be applied to or integrated in nearly every tubular shaped portion, which may be for example a part of a hydraulic unit of a land-, marine-, rail- or air transport vehicle.

[0041] According to another aspect, the forces which are detectable by the sensor assembly are not exclusively restricted to shear forces which originate from shear stress but may also originate due to tensile or compressive stress acting on the magneto-elastically active region(s) of the first pin and/or the second pin of the sensor assembly. In other words, shear stress and normal stress may both induce a variation of the polarization of the magnetically polarized region emanating from the magneto-elastically active region (s). This polarization may be detectable by the magnetic field sensor means which may output a signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux towards the polarization direction sensitive magnetic field sensor that may be configured to determine the acting force. Consequently, the magneto-elastically active region may be sensitive to all stress types. The embodiment may particularly be suitable, if the pin is exposed to only one single type of stress.

[0042] According to another aspect, the direction sensitive magnetic field sensors L may be one of a Hall-effect, magneto-resistance, magneto-transistor, magneto-diode, MAGFET field sensors or fluxgate magnetometer. These aspects advantageously apply to all embodiments of the invention.

[0043] According to another aspect, any hydraulic piston, crane application, car and other various applications incorporating bolts and load sensor pins **8, 9**, where shear forces may be applied, may be equipped with the sensor assembly according to aspects of the invention. Traditionally, shear force sensors using strain-gauges are designed in that they get intentionally weakened to provide enough deformation so as to allow a measurement of the applied loads. The magneto-elastically active region of the sensor assembly, however, provides the possibility to design the bolt without

weaken locations and significantly higher overload capability. The load pin having the integrated magneto-elastically active region provides the possibility to detect shear forces in load sensor pins **8, 9**, screws, bolts etc.

[0044] According to another aspect, a method of determining a direction of a load vector is provided. Within said method, a sensor assembly according to aspects of the invention is provided. In other words, a sensor assembly is provided which can comprise a first portion having a first and a second through-hole. The sensor assembly can further comprise a second portion having a third and a fourth through-hole. The third and the fourth through-hole can be positioned in correspondence to the first and the second through-hole. The sensor assembly can further comprise a first pin and a second pin. The first pin can be arranged such that it extends through the first and the third through-hole and the second pin can be arranged such that it extends through the second and the fourth through-hole, so as to couple the first portion to the second portion. At least one out of the first and the second pin can comprise at least one magneto-elastically active region that may directly or indirectly be attached to or form a part of the pin in such a manner that mechanic stress on the pin is transmitted to the magneto-elastically active region. The magneto-elastically active region can comprise at least one magnetically polarized region such that a polarization of the magnetically polarized region may become increasingly helically shaped as the applied stress increases. The sensor assembly can further comprise a magnetic field sensor means which may be arranged approximate the at least one magneto-elastically active region. The magnetic field sensor means may be configured to output a signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux which may emanate from the magnetically polarized region. The magnetic field sensor means may comprise at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor which may be configured to determine a shear force in at least one direction. The at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor may in particular be arranged to have a predetermined and fixed spatial coordination with the pin, wherein this pin may at least be partially hollow. The at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor may be arranged inside an interior of this pin.

[0045] Furthermore, within the method according to another aspect, the first pin and the second pin may be exposed to a load. Measurement data of the at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor may be processed so as to determine a shear stress and/or a tensile or compressive stress that is applied by the second portion and the first portion to the first and/or second load sensor pins **8, 9**.

[0046] In particular, a direction of a force F may be determined from the measurement data on the one hand and the predetermined and known spatial coordination between the direction sensitive magnetic field sensor(s), the first pin, the second pin and the point of load. The force F is applied to the sensor assembly via the second portion.

[0047] Same or similar advantages which have been already mentioned with respect to the sensor assembly having a magneto-elastically active region according to aspects of the invention apply in a same or similar way to the method of determining a direction of the load vector and will be not repeated.

[0048] Devices and methods related to magnetizing a cylindrical shaft, pin, or similar shaped object, and using magnetic field sensors positioned proximate to the same for

detecting a magnetic flux emanating from the object and other magnetic fields, are disclosed in one or more of the following patents owned by Methode Electronics, the entire contents and disclosures of which are incorporated herein by reference: U.S. Pat. No. 6,490,934 (“Circularly magnetized non-contact torque sensor and method for measuring torque using the same”); U.S. Pat. No. 6,553,847 (“Collarless circularly magnetized torque transducer and method for measuring torque using the same”); U.S. Pat. No. 6,904,814 (“Magnetic torque sensor system”); U.S. Pat. No. 7,140,258 (“Magnetic-based force/torque sensor”); U.S. Pat. No. 8,087,304 (“Magneto-elastic torque sensor with ambient field rejection”); U.S. Pat. No. 8,578,794 (“Magneto-elastic torque sensor with ambient field rejection”); and U.S. Pat. No. 8,893,562 (“System and method for detecting magnetic noise by applying a switching function”).

[0049] In many of the above references, a magneto-elastic torque sensor is described, in which an output signal indicative of a force applied to a member is provided. The sensor includes a first magneto-elastically active region in the member, the region being ferromagnetic, magnetostrictive magnetically polarized in a single circumferential direction and possessing sufficient magnetic anisotropy to return the magnetization in the region to the single circumferential direction when the applied torque is reduced to zero, whereby the ferromagnetic, magnetostrictive region produces a magnetic field varying with the torque. Magnetic field sensors are mounted proximate to the ferromagnetic, magnetostrictive region to sense the magnetic field at the sensors and provide the output signal in response thereto.

[0050] Apparatus and methods related to strain-induced magnetic anisotropy to measure the tension or compression present in a plate-like object are described in US20150204737 (“Magneto-elastic sensor”), owned by Methode Electronics, the entire content and disclosure of which are incorporated herein by reference. The device includes an annular region of a plate is magnetized with a circumferential magnetization. Magnetic field sensors are then placed near this magnetized band at locations where the magnetization direction is non-parallel and non-perpendicular to the axis of tension. The strain-induced magnetic anisotropy caused by tension or compression then produces a shift in the magnetization direction in the plate regions near the field sensors, thereby causing magnetic field changes which are detected by the magnetic field sensors. The magnetic field sensors are connected to an electronic circuit which outputs a voltage signal which indicates the tension or compression in the plate.

[0051] According to another aspect, an embedded software program is used to receive signals from various sensors and output a signal containing information useful in determining or assessing a load weight gauge (measuring the tongue load of a tow coupling), a tow load weight shift alert, an unsafe trailer load distribution alert, a vehicle limit notification, an automated trailer brake control (closed loop), a low/flat trailer tire notification, a check trailer brake notification, a closed loop braking control, a vehicle shift control, an engine control, and a stability control.

[0052] According to another aspect, shielding material or a shielding device or multiple shielding devices may be used to shield the load sensor pins **8, 9** from the effects of external magnetic sources, such as nearby permanent magnets. In one embodiment, a flux directly may be used to direct external

magnetic fields to minimize or reduce their effect on the load sensor pins 8, 9 and the output signal from the load sensor pins 8, 9.

[0053] According to another aspect, the load sensor pins 8, 9 output one or more signals to one or more microcontroller units. The microcontrollers are adapted to processing the signals and providing processed signals to a vehicle onboard control system via the vehicle's bus network. The processed signal may include information related to a comparison of the load pin forces to one or more threshold forces and instructional data for corrective actions to be taken by one or more vehicle control systems in response thereto.

[0054] In another aspect, the load sensor pins 8, 9 and other components of the tow coupling apparatus may be used to measure a sprung weight of a towing or towed vehicle by measuring the sheer forces on the load sensor pins 8, 9 caused by the weight on the vehicle producing a force on the load sensor pins 8, 9.

[0055] The present invention provides additional advantageous features related to magneto-elastic sensors for measuring forces, especially loads applied to one or more components of a vehicle hitch assembly.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0056] FIG. 1 is a simplified, schematic diagram of the outside of a load sensor pin for use with a tow coupling apparatus;

[0057] FIG. 2 is a simplified, schematic diagram of the outside of another load sensor pin for use with a vehicle tow coupling apparatus;

[0058] FIG. 3 is a simplified, perspective, exploded view diagram of some of the components of a "front" load sensor pin;

[0059] FIG. 4 is a simplified perspective view schematic diagram of a multi-pin electrical connector for use with the load sensor pin of FIG. 3;

[0060] FIG. 5 is a simplified, cross-sectional, plan view diagram of the load sensor of FIG. 3;

[0061] FIG. 6 is a simplified, perspective exploded view diagram of some of the components of a "back" load sensor pin;

[0062] FIG. 7 is a simplified, cross-sectional, plan view diagram of the load sensor of FIG. 6;

[0063] FIG. 8 is a simplified, partial, cross-sectional, plan view diagram of the load sensor of FIG. 6;

[0064] FIG. 9 is a simplified, partial, cross-sectional, plan view diagram of the "front" and "back" load sensor pins of FIGS. 3 and 6 and some of the components of a tow coupling apparatus;

[0065] FIG. 10A is a simplified, cross-sectional view drawing of another aspect of a load sensor pin;

[0066] FIG. 10B is a simplified, partial, cross-sectional, perspective view diagram of the load sensor pin of FIG. 10A;

[0067] FIG. 10C is a simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of another aspect of a load sensor pin of FIG. 10A;

[0068] FIG. 10D is a simplified, end view diagram of yet another aspect of the load sensor pin of FIG. 10A;

[0069] FIG. 11A is a simplified, schematic diagram of the load sensor pin of FIG. 2 with a shielding device;

[0070] FIG. 11B is a simplified, exploded, perspective view diagram of the components of a load sensor pin showing a printed circuit board between two elongated magnetic field shielding members;

[0071] FIG. 12A is a simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of a load sensor pin having a secondary magnetic field sensor;

[0072] FIG. 12B is another simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of the load sensor pin of FIG. 12A;

[0073] FIG. 13 is a simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of a tow coupling apparatus showing front load sensor pin 8 and back load sensor pin 9;

[0074] FIG. 14 is another simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of the components of the tow coupling apparatus showing front load sensor pin 8 and back load sensor pin 9;

[0075] FIG. 15 is a simplified, partial, cross-sectional, end view diagram of the components of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 13;

[0076] FIG. 16 is another simplified, partial, cross-sectional, end view diagram of the components of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 13;

[0077] FIG. 17A is a simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14;

[0078] FIG. 17B is a close-up simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of the apparatus of FIG. 14;

[0079] FIG. 18A is a simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14 showing a first load case;

[0080] FIG. 18B is another simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14 showing a different load case;

[0081] FIG. 19A is a simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of the vehicle tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14 with a shielding device;

[0082] FIG. 19B is a semi-transparent diagram of FIG. 19A;

[0083] FIG. 19C is another view of the shielding device of FIG. 19A;

[0084] FIG. 20 is a simplified, side view diagram of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14 showing another load case;

[0085] FIG. 21 is a simplified, side view diagram of a tow coupling apparatus and vehicle components;

[0086] FIG. 22 is a simplified, perspective view diagram of one component of a tow coupling apparatus showing upper and lower load sensor pins 8, 9;

[0087] FIG. 23 is a simplified, perspective view diagram of the coupling components of a vehicle tow coupling apparatus;

[0088] FIG. 24 is a simplified, perspective, exploded view diagram of some of the components of another tow coupling apparatus;

[0089] FIG. 25 is another simplified, perspective, exploded view diagram of the modified components of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 24;

[0090] FIG. 26 is a simplified, perspective view diagram of the components of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 24;

[0091] FIG. 27 is a simplified, process flow diagram of a method of cryogenically treating a load sensor pin;

[0092] FIG. 28A is a simplified, partial, exploded, perspective view diagram of a tow coupling apparatus including load sensor pins 8, 9;

[0093] FIG. 28B is another simplified, partial, exploded, perspective view diagram of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 28A;

[0094] FIG. 29 is a simplified, exploded, perspective view diagram of some of the components of the vehicle tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 28A;

[0095] FIG. 30 is a simplified, partial, cross-sectional view diagram of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 28A;

[0096] FIG. 31A is another simplified, plan view diagram of a load sensor pin;

[0097] FIG. 31B is an end view diagram of the load sensor pin of FIG. 31A;

[0098] FIG. 32A is a simplified, partial, axial, cross-sectional view diagram of a load sensor pin for use in the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 31A;

[0099] FIG. 32B is a simplified, partial, cross-section, end view diagram of the load sensor pin of FIG. 32A;

[0100] FIG. 33 is simplified, partial, cross-sectional view diagram of a load sensor pin for use in a tow coupling apparatus;

[0101] FIG. 34 through FIG. 41 are simplified, schematic, top view diagrams of a portion of a tow coupling apparatus showing various simplified load cases;

[0102] FIGS. 42A through 42AA are perspective view diagrams of tow hitch assemblies, towed or towing vehicles, and weight sensing assemblies using one or more load sensor pins at various force transmitting components.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0103] Several preferred embodiments of the invention are described for illustrative purposes, it being understood that the invention may be embodied in other forms not specifically described below and/or shown in the drawings.

[0104] For reference purposes, a Cartesian coordinate system is used to describe certain features, components, and directions, and unless otherwise stated or shown in the figures otherwise, the x-axis generally refers to a longitudinal direction, the y-axis generally refers to a transverse direction that is perpendicular to the x-axis, and the z-axis generally refers to a vertical direction that is perpendicular to a plane formed by the x- and y-axes.

[0105] Turning first to FIG. 1, shown therein is a simplified, schematic diagram of a load sensor pin 8 (and similar load sensor pin 9; as best seen in FIG. 5) for use with a tow coupling apparatus, one that is adapted to being attached to a towing vehicle (e.g., passenger automobile car or truck; not shown) at/near the back/rear bumper of the towing vehicle. The load sensor pin 8 referred to here is a “front” load sensor pin given its relative position with respect to the load sensor pin 9; that is, in one embodiment, the load sensor pin 8 is installed in the tow coupling apparatus such that it would be closer to the front of a towing vehicle when the tow coupling apparatus is mounted to the towing vehicle, whereas the load sensor pin 9 is behind the load sensor pin 8 and thus would be closer to the back of the towing vehicle. The relative positions of the load sensor pins 8, 9 may be different than the arrangement shown in the drawings, depending on the particular type of tow coupling application.

[0106] The load sensor pins 8, 9 may include a center portion 120 and longitudinally spaced apart end portions 130a, 130b on either side of the center portion 120. Between the center portion 120 and the end portion 130a is a magneto-elastically active portion 21 bordered by joints 142a and 144a (the same features are shown on the other side of the center portion 120). The magneto-elastically

active portion 21 is treated in such a way that a longitudinally-extending portion of the surface of the load sensor pins possess a magneto-elastic active region for producing an external magnetic field/flux, as further described below.

[0107] Each of the load sensor pins 8, 9 are preferably hollow shafts having a wall thickness ranging from about 0.2 mm at its thinnest to about 3 mm at its thickest along its longitudinal dimension, but the actual wall thickness may be determined based on a particular needs of the application in which the load sensor pins 8, 9 are used. The outer surface of the load sensor pins 8, 9 may have portions that are round or flat.

[0108] The dimension 122, which spans a portion of the center portion 120 and the magneto-elastically active portion 21 (as well as a portion of the center portion 120 and the magneto-elastically active portion 22), may vary by application. The dimension 124, which is a diameter of the end face of the end portion 130b of the load sensor pin 8, 9 (as well as a diameter of the end face of the end portion 130a of the load sensor pin 8, 9) may also vary as necessary. The dimension 126, which is the width of the magneto-elastically active portions 22 (as well as the width of the magneto-elastically active portions 21) may be about 8 mm to about 24 mm. The dimension 128, which is a diameter of the inner wall surface of the load sensor pin 8, 9 at the ends of the end portion 130a of the load sensor pin 8, 9 (as well as the a diameter of the inner wall surface of the load sensor pin 8, 9 at the ends of the end portion 130b of the load sensor pin 8, 9) may also vary by application.

[0109] All or some of the center portion 120 and the end portions 130a, 130b may be made from non-magnetic materials to keep near field magnetic field generating sources, such as a permanent magnet, magnetized wrench, motor, or solenoid, at a minimum distance from the load sensor pins 8, 9 to reduce or eliminate (below detection) the path of magnetic fields from those types of sources. This would limit or eliminate the effect these near field sources have on the force dependent field measurements produced by the magneto-elastically active portions 21, 22 of the load sensor pins 8, 9.

[0110] Another way to reduce the influence of external magnetic fields in/on the load sensor pins 8, 9 is to have only the shear areas of the load sensor pins 8, 9 made of ferromagnetic material. That is, it is not necessary for the rest of the load sensor pins 8, 9 to be made from a ferromagnetic material, and in some instances it is rather undesirable as such materials only act as a flux director for channeling external magnetic fields towards the magnetic field measurement coils (not shown).

[0111] The load sensor pins 8, 9 are further described in Applicant's European patent application EP17162429.9, which is incorporated herein by reference.

[0112] Turning now to FIG. 2, shown therein is a simplified, schematic diagram of another aspect of the load sensor pin 8, 9 of FIG. 1 in which the center portion 120 is divided into two separate center portions 120a, 120b, separated by a joint. In this embodiment, all or some of the center portions 120a, 120b, along with their adjacent magneto-elastic active portions 21, 22, are made from a material and/or treated as described above in such a way that they produce an external magnetic field/flux.

[0113] To construct the load sensor pins 8, 9 as shown in FIG. 1 and FIG. 2, the different materials of the various portions could be welded together (e.g. using friction weld-

ing). Another possibility would be to take a load sensor pin **8,9** constructed of austenitic stainless steel (non-magnetic) and transform the shear areas to a martensitic material through the process of cold working thus forming the magneto-elastic active portions **21, 22**.

[0114] Turning now to FIG. 3 and FIG. 5, shown therein are a simplified, perspective and cross-sectional, and exploded view diagrams of some of the components of the first load sensor pin **8**. As shown, the load sensor pin **8** includes a retaining clip **302**, a printed circuit board **304**, a set of connector pins **306**, a support member **308** having a pin connector housing **311** (as also shown in FIG. 4) on a terminating end, and a pair of sealing rings **310**. The retaining clip **302** is used to fix the support member **308** in a way that minimizes movement after it is fixed in its final assembled state. The printed circuit board **304** may have one or more (such as four) magnetic field sensors (described below) mounted thereon each with leads for connecting to the set of connector pins **306**. The printed circuit board **304** includes a suitable processor, memory, and embedded software (not shown). The set of connector pins **306** include insert molded pins on one end for extending up and through pre-drilled through-holes on the printed circuit board **304** for connecting to the one or more magnetic field sensors and other circuit components on the printed circuit board **304**. The other end of the set of connector pins **306** terminate with suitable latch-type or friction fit-type pins that connect with a suitable connector of an electrical harness (as best seen in FIG. 12A). The sealing rings **310** are used to prevent anything from entering the interior of the load sensor pin **8**.

[0115] Turning now to FIG. 6 and FIG. 7, shown therein are simplified, perspective and cross-sectional, exploded view diagrams of some of the components of the second load sensor pin **9**. As shown, the load sensor pin **9** includes a retaining clip **602**, a printed circuit board **604**, a set of connector pins **606**, a support member **608**, a pair of sealing rings **610**, and a connector housing **611**. The retaining clip **602** is used to fix the support member **608** after it is fixed in its final assembled state to prevent movement. The printed circuit board **604** may have one or more (such as eight) magnetic field sensors (not shown) mounted thereon each with leads for connecting to the connector pins **606**, which in turn lead to a flat, circular-shaped printed circuit board. The printed circuit board **604** includes a suitable processor, memory, and embedded software (not shown). A micro ribbon or cable (as shown in FIG. 8) connects the printed circuit board **604** and a circular printed circuit board. The flat, circular-shaped printed circuit board connects to a four-pin connector inside the connector housing **611**. The sealing rings **610** are used to prevent anything from entering the interior of the load sensor pin **9**.

[0116] Turning now to FIG. 9, shown therein is a simplified, partial, cross-sectional, plan view diagram of the “front” and “back” load sensor pins of FIGS. 3 and 6 and some of the components of a tow coupling apparatus as they could be employed in connection with a tow coupling apparatus (for ease of reference, the two load sensor pins are shown with load sensor pin **9** on top of load sensor pin **8**). As shown, the center portions **120** of the load sensor pins **8, 9** are rigidly fixed inside the through-holes of a bracket **902** that generally surrounds the load pins **8, 9**. The end portions **130a, 130b** of the load sensor pins **8, 9** are further rigidly fixed inside corresponding through-holes of the yoke-like projections **904a, 904b** of a generally U-shaped adapter **904**

(supporting yoke) that surrounds the bracket **902**. Bushings **906a, 906b, 906c, 906d** surround respective portions of the load sensor pin **9**, and bushings **908a, 908b, 908c, 908d** surround respective portions of the load sensor pin **8**. The bushings may be brass or some other material. In some embodiments, no bushings are used between the end portions **130a, 130b** of the load sensor pins **8, 9** and the respective through-holes of the side yoke-like projections **904a, 904b** of the adapter **904**. In that embodiment, the load sensor pins **8, 9** are in direct contact with the walls of the through-holes.

[0117] The load sensor pins **8, 9** are made from one or more materials, in addition to ferromagnetic materials, and are constructed in such a way that they are suitable for forming the magneto-elastic active regions **21, 22**. The chosen materials and construction of the various portions of the load sensor pins **8, 9** should be such that the nature of the shaft of the load sensor pins **8, 9** is one that is elastically deformable. This provides for the relative movement between the center portions **120** (caused by a force imparted by the bracket **902** on the center portions **120**) and the rigidly fixed end portions **130a, 130b** (maintained in a stationary position by the adapters **904**). The eccentric deformation caused by forces imparted on the load sensor pins **8, 9** causes the magneto-elastic active regions **21, 22** to produce the external magnetic field/flux as previously described.

[0118] Turning now to FIGS. 10A through 10D, shown therein are a simplified cross-sectional, perspective view drawings of others aspects of a load sensor pin **8, 9**. In FIG. 10A, a load sensor pin **8** has a length along its longitudinal direction such that the slot **312** (and slot **612**) for receiving the retaining clip **302** is outside the bushing **908d** (**906d** in the case of the load sensor pin **9**). In one embodiment, the slots **312, 316** may be about 1.5 mm wide and have an inner diameter of about 24 mm, and they may be about 4 mm from the end of the load sensor pin **8**. In FIG. 10C, the retaining clip **302** includes a raised flange or post **302a** that fits inside a pole yoke opening **314** as best seen in FIG. 10B to prevent the retaining clip **302** from slipping out of its slot **312** (similarly, the retaining clip **602** includes a raised flange or post to prevent the retaining clip **602** from slipping out of its slot **612**). The pole yoke opening **314** may extend through the wall of the load sensor pin **8**, for example to accept a raised flange or post **302a** having about a 2 mm length. In FIG. 10D, one possible configuration for the retaining clips **302, 602** is shown.

[0119] Turning now to FIG. 11A and FIG. 11B, shown therein is a simplified, schematic diagram of one of the load sensor pins **8, 9** of FIG. 2 inside a shielding device **910**, and a simplified, exploded, perspective view diagram of the components of a load sensor pin **8, 9** showing a printed circuit board **304, 604** between two elongated magnetic field shielding members **912a, 912b**, respectively. In FIG. 11A, the shielding device **910** may be a box or other shape and is made using materials with high magnetic permeability, which shunts an external magnetic field by offering a path of low resistance to the field and thereby minimizing or eliminating the influence of the field on the force dependent field measurements produced by the load sensor pins **8, 9**. In FIG. 11B, the shielding members **912, 912b** also help to minimize or eliminate the influence of the field on the force dependent field measurements produced by the load sensor pins **8, 9**. Shielding effects are further described in Applicant’s U.S.

Pat. No. 8,578,794 (Magneto-elastic Torque Sensor with Ambient Field Rejection), which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

[0120] Turning now to FIG. 12A, shown therein is a simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of a load sensor pin having a secondary magnetic field sensor 916. FIG. 12B shows another simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of the load sensor pin of FIG. 12A. The components of one of the load sensor pins 8, 9, is shown in which its respective printed circuit board 304, 604 includes primary magnetic field sensors 914a, 914b and a secondary magnetic field sensor 916. The secondary magnetic field sensor 916 may be a 3-axis compass sensor (either standalone or as part of a 9-axis sensor), which is used to detect the presence of external magnetic fields in the case that the shielding elements described above are not effective in eliminating all external fields. Information outputted by the secondary magnetic field sensor 916 could be used to perform compensation calculations on the force measurements. In addition, each of the load sensor pins 8, 9 could include extra sensing coils arranged in a way to minimize the influence of external magnetic fields on the measurement of the forces by the primary magnetic field sensors 914a, 914b.

[0121] The effects of external magnetic fields may also be taken into account by computational means using a suitable algorithm, which may be processed by embedded software on the printed circuit board 304, 604, or in a separate electronics module 980 connected to the printed circuit board 304, 604 via cable connector 982. Due to the mechanical configuration of a sensor system assembly (especially ones with two or more load sensor pins 8, 9 or two sensing planes), there can be certain relationships between the forces detected by the load sensor pins 8, 9 that have to be fulfilled. An external field is likely to cause an implausible relationships/combinations of individual forces measured, which an algorithm could detect and compensate for.

[0122] Turning now to FIG. 13, shown therein is a simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of a tow coupling apparatus showing front load sensor pin 8 and back load sensor pin 9 for coupling a towing vehicle to a towed vehicle. As shown, the tow coupling apparatus includes a bracket 902 attached to a receiver tube 920, and a generally U-shaped adapter 904 attached to a hitch tube 922.

[0123] The hitch tube 922 is a longitudinally extending, round, oval, square, or other shape member of the type typically used to attach to a towing vehicle (not shown) near the rear bumper of the towing vehicle. The hitch tube 922 is the component that couples the tow coupling apparatus to the towing vehicle to transmit force (generated by the towing vehicle's engine) to a towed vehicle (not shown), such as a trailer. Bolts or other fastening means may be used to securely attach the hitch tube 912 to the towing vehicle.

[0124] The adapter 904 has two side yoke-like projections 904a, 904b extending approximately 90-degrees from a base portion such that they are parallel to each other. Each side wall includes through-holes: first and second through-holes 924-1, 924-2 on the side wall 904b, and third and fourth through-holes 924-3, 924-4 on the side wall 904a, such that the first and third through-holes 924-1, 924-3 are axially aligned with each other, and the second and fourth through-holes 924-2, 924-4 are also axially aligned with each other. The end portions 130a, 130b of the load sensor pins 8, 9 are

rigidly fixed inside the through-holes of the side yoke-like projections 904a, 904b of the adapter 904, in some cases using collars or bushings, that surrounds the bracket 902 as shown.

[0125] The bracket 902, which may be a single member or two separate members arranged on front and back sides of the hitch tube 922, fits between the two side yoke-like projections 904a, 904b of the adapter 904 when the tow coupling apparatus components are in an assembled state. The bracket 902 includes a front portion and a back portion. The front portion and the back portion each includes a through-hole (not shown) axially aligned with the through-holes on the adapter 904 when the components are in the assembled state. Through-holes on the front and back portions of the adapter 904 may be slightly larger than the through-holes 924-1, 924-2, 924-3, 924-4 such that shear forces transmitted from the receiver tube 920 are introduced into the load sensor pins 8, 9 by abutment surfaces of the through-holes 924-1, 924-2, 924-3, 924-4 in the adapter 904 and abutment surfaces of the through-holes in the bracket 902.

[0126] The bracket 902 and the adapter 904 are each made of a material selected from suitable materials that resist deforming over time under a range of expected applied forces.

[0127] There may be a gap of about 0.5 mm between the top of the bracket 902 and the connecting base portion of the adapter 904 (the portion that connects to the hitch tube 922). The thickness of the base portion of the adapter 904 in the configuration shown may be 8 mm. Alternatively, the thickness of the base portion of the adapter 904 may be 10 mm, which may be achieved, for example, by modifying the placement of the various through-holes and changing other dimensions of the adapter 904.

[0128] Turning now to FIG. 14, shown therein is another simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of the components of the tow coupling apparatus showing front load sensor pin 8 and back load sensor pin 9. In this embodiment, an alternative approach to using the adapter 904 is shown. Instead of a one-piece adapter 904 with a base portion, two spaced apart side yoke-like projections 904a, 904b, and through-holes 924-1, 924-2, 924-3, 924-4, the alternative adapter includes four separate adapters 904-1, 904-2, 904-3, 904-4 each separately connected directly to a hitch tube 922 as shown.

[0129] Turning now to FIG. 15 and FIG. 16, shown therein are simplified, partial, cross-sectional, end view diagrams of the components of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 13. As shown in FIG. 15, the lower edge of the side yoke-like projections 904a, 904b of the adapter 904 include a beveled edge such that there is a gap of about 7 mm between the bevel edge and the closest edge of the receiver tube 920. There is also a gap of about 0.5 mm between the upper edge of the bracket 902 and the base portion of the adapter 904 (the thickness of the base portion here could be about 8 mm or as needed to provide rigidity for the side yoke-like projections 904a, 904b). As shown in FIG. 16, the gap between the upper edge of the bracket 902 and the base portion of the adapter 904 is increased from 0.5 mm to 5 mm (the thickness of the base portion here could be about 10 mm to provide additional rigidity for the side yoke-like projections 904a, 904b). Various other dimensions (thickness) of the base portion of the adapter 904 are also contemplated and may be suitable for different expected forces or loads on

the tow coupling apparatus components. Also shown are press-fit bushings having a pre-determined radial thickness inserted into the axially-aligned through-holes of the bracket.

[0130] Turning now to FIG. 17A and FIG. 17B, shown therein are simplified, partial, perspective view diagrams of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14. Specifically, a drawbar 930 is shown inserted into the receiver tube 920 and may be fastened in the receiver tube 920 with a connecting pin (not shown). As described below, the drawbar 930 is the connection member between the tow coupling apparatus and the towed vehicle (e.g., trailer), and thus is a force-transmitting member that can be monitored by use of the load sensor pins 8, 9 as previously described.

[0131] In particular, FIG. 18A is a simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14 showing a first load case in which a force is applied to the proximate or free end of the drawbar 930 (i.e., the end closest to the viewer). This applied force will be transmitted to the distal or pinned end of the drawbar 930 inside the receiver tube 920. That is, the force corresponding to the transmitted force at the distal end of the drawbar 930 by the towed vehicle may be transmitted to the receiver tube 920. That force then acts on the bracket 902 attached to the receiver tube 920. As the bracket 902 displaces the load sensor pins 8, 9 (the ends of which are rigidly attached to the adapter 904), the sheer force causes the magneto-elastically active portions 140a, 140b to output a magnetic field that is detectable by magnetic field sensors 914a, 914b.

[0132] For example, assume a force is applied to the proximate end of the drawbar 930 in the direction shown. In this embodiment, the force transmitted to the back load sensor pin 9 may be determined with respect to the adapters 904-2, 904-4. The output signals from the magnetic field sensors associated with the load sensor pin 9 may be received in a suitable algorithm, for example one that is embedded on a circuit board having a suitable processor located inside the load sensor pin 9, or in a separate module 980 (FIG. 12A) that could be integrated into the towing vehicle electronics. The received output signals from the load sensor pin 9 (and from the load sensor pin 8) may be indicative of the magnetic field/flux exhibited by the load sensor pins, and thus may be used to determine that a force has vector components of 6653 N in the x-direction and -5138 N in the y-direction (associated with the x-y-z Cartesian coordinate system shown). Moreover, the received output signals may be further used to determine that the other force vector components are -6245 N in the x-direction and 6 N in the y-direction as shown. The algorithm/processor may compute that the force applied to the proximate end of the drawbar 930 has a magnitude of 3514 N and is applied in the direction shown (i.e., toward the right or in the y-direction). The table below indicates the forces that may be determined as a result of forces transmitted to the load sensor pins 8, 9.

TABLE 1

Force Vectors on Adapters		Front Reaction (N)	Joint Probe (N)	Total (N)
904-1	x	5387.6	0	5387.6
	y	6.3344	0	6.3344
	z	-2082.9	-1012.4	-3095.3

TABLE 1-continued

Force Vectors on Adapters		Front Reaction (N)	Joint Probe (N)	Total (N)
904-3	x	-5513.2	0	-5513.2
	y	1641.7	-29.643	1612.057
	z	4731.4	-1772.6	2958.8
904-2	x	6652.6	0	6652.6
	y	-5018.3	-119.39	-5137.69
	z	399.02	-5634.6	-5235.58
904-4	x	-6245.6	0	-6245.6
	y	5.6106	0	5.6106
	z	2745.4	2626.7	5372.1

[0133] The information about the applied force at the proximate end of the drawbar 930, and related information (such as a result of a comparison of the force computation to a pre-determined force threshold or limit value), may be provided to the towing vehicle for any number of useful purposes, such as displaying the information and/or related information to the vehicle operator or as input to a vehicle system such as a braking system, a stability system, a transmission system, a trailer backing system, or an engine controller system.

[0134] Turning now to FIG. 18B, shown therein is another simplified, partial, perspective view diagram of some of the components of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14 showing a different load case as summarized in the following table.

TABLE 2

Force Vectors on Adapters		Front Reaction (N)	Joint Probe (N)	Total (N)
904-1	x	9285.7	0	9285.7
	y	-3343	0	-3343
	z	-2947.5	-1493.6	-4441.1
904-3	x	-9282.6	0	-9282.6
	y	5.0979	-65.01	-59.9121
	z	5260.1	-1087.9	4172.2
904-2	x	11322	0	11322
	y	8.541	-128.91	-120.369
	z	893.49	-5098.8	-4205.31
904-4	x	-10776	0	-10776
	y	9.5836	0	9.5836
	z	2265.8	2208.5	4474.3

[0135] Turning now to FIG. 19A, FIG. 19B, and FIG. 19C, shown therein are simplified, partial, perspective view diagrams of the vehicle tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14 in which a shielding device 190 is used to surround the load sensor pins 8, 9 for shielding the magneto-elastically active portions 140a, 140b and the magnetic field sensors 914a, 914b from external magnetic fields. The shielding device 190 is preferably made from or utilizes highly magnetically permeable materials to conduct external magnetic fields away from the load sensor pins 8, 9. The shielding device 190 provides openings for sheathed cables 192, 194, which connect the electronics of the load sensor pins 8, 9 to external circuits, to pass through the shielding device 190. In case of an AC near field source, even a thin metal shielding device 190 is able to provide good shielding. An external AC magnetic field will create eddy currents inside of the shield material, which in turn will create a magnetic field that opposes the incident field, thereby cancelling the incident field. The shielding material may be magnetic or non-magnetic but should have a high electric conductivity.

[0136] Turning now to FIG. 20, shown therein is a simplified, side view diagram of the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 14 showing another load case. In particular, a drawbar 930 with a ball-style hitch (typically welded or bolted to the proximate or free end of the drawbar 930) is shown inserted in the receiver tube 920 and held in place with a fastening pin (other devices for connecting the drawbar and receiver are also contemplated). The large arrows indicate the forces that might act on the assembled tow coupling apparatus in the plane of the diagram (x-z plane, assuming the y-direction is out of the page).

[0137] An algorithm (such as in the form of embedded software in/on the load sensor pins 8,9 or in the separate module 980 (FIG. 12A)) may utilize values for the following variables (all linear dimensions are measured along the x- or z-direction as shown):

TABLE 3

Variable/Parameter	Type/Description
Load sensor pin, outer diameter	Length (mm)
Load sensor pin, inner diameter	Length (mm)
Load sensor pin, width overall	Length (L) (mm)
Load sensor pin, height	Length (h_{pins}) (mm)
Drawbar drop	Length (mm)
Drawbar drop height	Length (h_{drop}) (mm)
Distance to back load sensor pin 9	Length (d_A) (mm)
Distance between load sensor pins	Length (d_{pins}) (mm)
Drawbar fastening pin hole size, diameter	Length (mm)
Distance between the end of the drawbar and the drawbar fastening pin hole	Length (mm)
Distance between the coupling point (ball) and the drawbar fastening pin hole	Length (mm)
Distance of the material between the two load sensor pins	Length (mm)
Distance from the back load sensor pin to the back end of the tow coupling apparatus	Length (mm)
Distance between the drawbar fastening pin hole and the front load sensor pin	Length (mm)

[0138] Inputs associated with each of the above variables will be processed by the aforementioned processor which executes software algorithms that are embedded in/on the memory or storage device on the printed circuit boards 304, 604 of the load sensor pins 8, 9, or that are embedded in/on a printed circuit board of the separate module 980 outside the load sensor pins 8, 9. The inputs are used in at least the following equations:

$$\sum F_L = 0; \quad (1)$$

$$F_L - A_L = 0 \quad (2)$$

$$\sum F_V = 0; \quad (3)$$

$$F_V + A_V - B_V = 0 \quad (4)$$

$$\sum M_A = 0 \quad (5)$$

$$B_V \cdot d_{pins} + F_V \cdot d_A + F_L \cdot (h_{pins} + h_{drop}) = 0 \quad (6)$$

$$A_L = F_L \quad (7)$$

$$A_V = -F_V + B_V \quad (8)$$

$$B_V = \frac{-F_V \cdot d_A - F_L \cdot (h_{pins} + h_{drop})}{d_{pins}} \quad (9)$$

[0139] In one embodiment, the software computes a tongue force (F-tongue), tow force (F-tow), and a sway force (F-sway) according to industry-specific and federal specifications, such as those of Ultimate Load (per SAE J684 for Hitch Test Loads), and Ultimate Loads (per SAE J684 Strength Test Loads for Balls and Trailer couplings). Other methods and standards may also be used, including those for other countries/regions (e.g., European Union).

[0140] In another embodiment, the embedded software may be used to receive signals from various other sensors (not shown) and output a signal containing information useful in determining or assessing a load weight gauge (measuring the tongue load of a coupling between the tow and towing vehicles), a tow load weight shift alert, an unsafe towed vehicle load distribution alert, a towing vehicle limit notification, an automated towed vehicle brake control (closed loop) signal, a low/flat towed vehicle tire notification, a check towed vehicle brake notification, a closed loop braking control, a towing vehicle shift control, a towing vehicle engine control, and a towing vehicle stability control.

[0141] In still another embodiment, the software may provide a signal corresponding to a value in a pre-determined output range (provided in, e.g., N and lb), an ultimate or maximum load weight carrying output (provided in, e.g., N and lb), and an ultimate or maximum ball load and trailer hitch output (also in, e.g., N and lb).

[0142] Additional software inputs may include load sensor pin outer diameter, inner diameter, wall thickness, free length L, and shear points (all in millimeters). Calculated stress values may include maximum sheer stress and bending stress, among others (all in N/mm²). A static safety factor may also be computed.

[0143] Turning now to FIG. 21, shown therein is a simplified, side view diagram of a tow coupling apparatus and vehicle components. In particular, the tow coupling apparatus is mounted such that it does not interfere with a bumper step 940 (which is above the hitch tube 922) and spare tire 944 (which is behind the hitch tube 922, in some cases by only a few inches, such as 3 inches). Spare tires stored below a towing vehicle's body frame or other components are typically lowered to the ground by a cable and winch mechanisms (not shown), and can swing on the cable and potentially strike the tow coupling apparatus. To ensure that the spare tire 944 avoids striking the tow coupling apparatus upon being raised or lowered, an angled guide member 942 is positioned forward of the tow coupling apparatus and between the tow coupling apparatus and the spare tire 944 as shown.

[0144] Turning now to FIG. 22 through FIG. 27, shown therein are simplified, schematic, exploded, perspective and plan view diagrams of another tow coupling apparatus for coupling a towing vehicle to a towed vehicle. FIG. 22 is a simplified, perspective view diagram of one component of a tow coupling apparatus showing upper and lower load sensor pins 8, 9 for use with a towed vehicle coupler 220, which mates with a towing vehicle coupler 230. In the embodiments shown, the load sensor pins 8, 9 are arranged generally vertically (along z-axis) with respect to each other (as compared to, for example, the embodiments of FIG. 13 and FIG. 14, in which the load sensor pins 8, 9 are arranged horizontally (along x-axis)). The two load sensor pins 8, 9 are positioned in the towed vehicle coupler 220 in respective upper and lower brackets 222-1, 222-2, with or without

bushings. The towing vehicle coupler 230 includes four adapters 232-1, 232-2, 232-3, 232-4 such that the through-holes on the upper bracket 222-1 are axially aligned with the through-holes of the adapters 232-1, 232-2, and the through-holes on the lower bracket 222-2 are axially aligned with the through-holes of the adapters 232-3, 232-4. When aligned, the load sensor pins 8, 9 may be rigidly fixed in the through-holes, such that the couplers 220 and 230 may be coupled together as illustrated in FIG. 24.

[0145] In FIG. 25, the towed vehicle coupler 220 is modified such that it includes a hitch part 220a having a bracket 250 and through-holes 252, and a coupler part 220b having through-holes 254. The through-holes 252, 254 permit a user to vertically adjust (z-axis) the relative position of the hitch part 220a and the coupler part 220b with respect to each other (a fastening pin, not shown, is inserted into the through-holes 252, 254, once they are axially aligned). When the hitch part 220a, couplers part 220b, and towing vehicle coupler 230 aligned, the load sensor pins 8, 9 may be rigidly fixed in the through-holes, such that the tow coupling apparatus may be coupled together as illustrated in FIG. 26.

[0146] Turning now to FIG. 27, shown therein is a simplified, process flow diagram 270 describing a method for rigidly fixing the load sensor pins 8, 9 inside the brackets and adapters as shown and described above. As an initial step, the load sensor pins 8, 9 are first received along with the various tow coupling apparatus components. With reference to FIG. 13, for example, these would include providing a bracket 902 attached to a receiver tube 920, and a generally U-shaped adapter 904 attached to a hitch tube 922.

[0147] In a first treatment step 272, the first magneto-elastically active region 21 and the second magneto-elastically active region 22 of the load sensor pins 8, 9 are each directly or indirectly attached to or form respective parts of the load sensor pins 8, 9, such that the load sensor pins 8, 9 will have the characteristics previously described (the magneto-elastic properties are described in more detail in the aforementioned Applicant's patents incorporated by reference).

[0148] In a second treatment step 274, when it is desired for the load sensor pins 8, 9 to have one or more collars (not shown) around all or a portion of the end portions 130a, 130b of the load sensor pins 8, 9, the collars are arranged such that the positions of the one or more collars substantially correspond to one or more of the positions of the through-holes 924-1, 924-2 on the side wall 904b of the bracket 904, and through-holes 924-3, 924-4 on the side wall 904a of the bracket 904. Also, when it is desired for the bracket 902 and adapter 904 to be configured in such a way as to provide a gap therebetween, a gap material may be inserted.

[0149] In the next step 276, the load sensor pins 8, 9, and when necessary the collars/bushing 906a, 906b, 906c, 906d, 908a, 908b, 908c, 908d (as best seen in FIG. 9), may be cryogenically treated to reduce their cross-section dimension to permit inserting in the respective through-holes.

[0150] In the next step 278, respective printed circuit board 304, 604 with magnetic field sensors are mounted or arranged proximate to the magneto-elastically active portion 140a, 140b either before or after the load sensor pins 8, 9 are treated and positioned in the respective through-holes after being treated.

[0151] In a next step, the cryogenically treated load sensor pins 8, 9, and the various tow coupling apparatus components described above are all aligned. The load sensor pins 8, 9 are then inserted and the load sensor pins 8, 9 and other components are allowed to return to ambient temperature. The cryogenic treatment process may be conducted in conjunction with (such as following) a heat treatment process performed on the load sensor pins 8, 9. Both treatment processes are performed in a manner such that crystalline changes following magnetization of the load sensor pins 8, 9 is avoided.

[0152] Turning now to FIG. 28A and FIG. 28B, shown therein are simplified, partial, exploded, perspective view diagrams of another type of vehicle tow coupling apparatus 100 incorporating the load sensor pins 8, 9. The tow coupling apparatus 100 includes a sensor assembly 1 for force sensing. The sensor assembly includes a first portion 2 (supporting yoke) having a first through-hole 3 and a second through-hole 4, a second portion 5 (receiving tube) having a third through-hole 6 and fourth through-hole 7. The third and fourth through-holes 6, 7 are positioned in correspondence to the first and second through-holes 3, 4.

[0153] The second portion defines a Cartesian coordinate system having a longitudinal x-axis direction, a transversal y-axis direction, and a vertical z-axis direction. The longitudinal direction extends in the direction of longitudinal extension of the second portion. The transversal direction extends in a direction perpendicular to the longitudinal direction and in a horizontal plane. The vertical direction extends in a direction that perpendicular to the longitudinal direction and the transversal direction.

[0154] The sensor assembly 1 further includes a first load sensor pin 8 and a second load sensor pin 9. The load sensor pin 8 is arranged such that it extends through the first and third through-holes 3, 6. The load sensor pin 9 is arranged such that it extends through the second and fourth through-holes 4, 7. The first portion 2 is coupled to the second portion 5 via the first and second load sensor pins 8, 9.

[0155] At least one out of the first and the second load sensor pin 8, 9 includes at least one magneto-elastically active region 10 (as shown in FIG. 30) that is directly or indirectly attached to or forms a part of the load sensor pin 8, 9 in such a manner that mechanic stress of the load sensor pin 8, 9 is transmitted to the magneto-elastically active region 10. The magneto-elastically active region 10 includes at least one magnetically polarized region such that a polarization of the polarized region becomes increasingly helically shaped as the applied stress increases.

[0156] The at least one load sensor pin 8, 9 further includes a magnetic field sensor means arranged approximate the at least one magneto-elastically active region 10 for outputting a signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the magnetically polarized region.

[0157] The magnetic field sensor means includes at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor L. The at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor is configured for determination of a shear force in at least one direction. The at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor L is in particular arranged to have a predetermined and fixed spatial coordination with the respective load sensor pin 8, 9.

[0158] The load sensor pin 8, 9 includes the at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor L is at least partially hollow. The at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor L is arranged inside the interior of the pin 8, 9.

[0159] The first through-hole 3 and the third through-hole 6 are configured such that they encompass the first load sensor pin 8 in a positive-fitting manner. In other words, the first load sensor pin 8 extends through the first and third through-holes 3, 6, and the first load sensor pin 8 is supported in at least two rotational degrees of freedom and at least two translational degrees of freedom by abutting surfaces of the through-holes.

[0160] The second load sensor pin 9 is encompassed by the second through-hole 4 in a positive-fitted manner. In other words, the second load sensor pin 9 extends through the second through-hole 4, and the second load sensor pin 9 is supported in at least two rotational degrees of freedom and at least two translational degrees of freedom by abutting surfaces of the second through-hole 4.

[0161] The fourth through-hole 7 is configured such that the second load sensor pin 9 has one additional degree of freedom of movement (compared to the first load sensor pin 8 in the third through-hole 6) within the fourth through-hole 7. Differently stated, the second load sensor pin 9 extends through fourth through-hole 7, and the second load sensor pin 9 is supported in at least two rotational degrees of freedom and at least one translational degree of freedom by abutting surfaces of the through-holes. The number of translational degrees of freedom of the second load sensor pin 9 in the fourth through-hole 7 is one more than the number of translational degrees of freedom of the first load sensor pin 8 the third through-hole 6.

[0162] The additional degree of freedom is a translational degree of freedom that extends in the longitudinal x-axis direction.

[0163] The first portion 2 has a yoke-like shape, wherein yoke legs 11 of the first portion comprise the first through-hole 3 and second through-hole 4. The second portion 5 has a tubular shape, wherein side walls and/or a center wall of the second portion 5 comprise the third through-hole 6 and the fourth through-hole 7.

[0164] The direction sensitive magnetic field sensor is (or the direction sensitive magnetic field sensors are) configured to detect force components of shear forces introduced into the load sensor pins 8, 9 by the first portion 2 and the second portion 5.

[0165] The first and/or second load sensor pin 8, 9 is fixedly attached (in all six degrees of freedom in a predetermined manner) to the first portion 2. Bolts 12 screw the load sensor pins 8, 9 (via attachment flanges of the pins) to yoke legs 11 of the first portion 2.

[0166] The second portion 5 includes a center wall 13 extending in the longitudinal x-axis direction and the vertical z-axis direction, the third through-hole 6 and fourth through-hole 7 extend through the center wall 13 (as best seen in FIG. 29).

[0167] The first portion 2 has a yoke-like shape, wherein the yoke legs 11 of the first portion 2 comprise the first and second through-holes 3, 4, and wherein the center wall includes the third and fourth through-holes 6, 7.

[0168] Direction sensitive magnetic field sensor(s) L is/are configured to detect force components of shear forces introduced into the load sensor pins 8, 9 by the first portion 2 and the second portion 5.

[0169] Side walls 14 of the second portion 5 comprise through-holes in side walls that are larger than the third and fourth through-holes 6, 7, such that the shear forces are introduced into the load sensor pins 8, 9 by abutment

surfaces of the first and second through-holes 3, 4 in the yoke legs 11 and abutment surfaces of the third and fourth through-holes 6, 7 in the center wall 13.

[0170] The tow coupling apparatus 100 includes the sensor assembly 1. The first portion 2 is a tow coupling apparatus that is attached to a hitch tube 101 of a towing vehicle.

[0171] The second portion 5 is a receiving tube that is configured to receive a drawbar 102 (hitch bar, ball mount) of the tow coupling apparatus 100. The drawbar 102 can be partially inserted into the second portion 5. A pin 103 secures the drawbar 102 to the second portion 5.

[0172] Turning now to FIG. 30, shown therein is a simplified, cross-sectional view diagram of another tow hitch sensor assembly including first and second load sensor pins 8, 9 extend through the first through-hole 3 and the second through-hole 4 in the first portion 2 and through the third through-hole 6 and the fourth through-hole 7 in the second portion 5. The first and/or second load sensor pins 8, 9 is an at least partially hollow pin that may be sealed by a front cover 15 and a rear cover 16. The rear cover 16 may provide a cable bushing to provide access for supply and/or signal lines 17. The load sensor pins 8, 9 include a plurality of direction sensitive field sensors L. A printed circuit board 18 supports the direction sensitive field sensors L. The load sensor pins 8, 9 can include one or more collars 19 of comparatively low magnetic permeability (compared to the hollow shaft of the load sensor pins 8, 9) arranged such that the positions of the one or more collars 19 substantially correspond to one or more of the positions of the through-holes 3, 4, 6, 7 in the first and/or second portion. Alternatively, one or more of the through-holes 3, 4, 6, 7 can comprise a collar/bushing 19 of comparatively low magnetic permeability (compared to the hollow shaft of the load sensor pins 8, 9). The first portion 2 and the second portion 5 may be configured to provide a gap between the first portion 2 and the second portion 5. The gap may comprise a material of low magnetic permeability (compared to the hollow shaft of the load sensor pins 8, 9).

[0173] Turning now to FIG. 31A and FIG. 31B, shown therein are a simplified, partial, cross-sectional plan and end view diagrams of another configuration of the load sensor pins 8, 9 as used in, for example, the tow coupling apparatus of FIG. 30. The first and/or the second load sensor pin 8, 9 includes at least one respective first x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, Lx12 configured to detect a force component Fx1 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the longitudinal x-axis direction. The first and/or the second load sensor pins 8, 9 includes at least one respective second x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, Lx22 configured to detect a force component Fx2 in the second magneto-elastically active region 22 in the longitudinal x-axis direction. The first and/or the second load sensor pins 8, 9 includes at least one respective first z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11, Lz12 configured to detect a force component Fz1 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the vertical x-axis direction. The first and/or the second load sensor pins 8, 9 includes at least one second z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21, Lz22 configured to detect a force component Fz2 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the vertical z-axis direction.

[0174] The sensor means includes at least four magnetic field sensors L having a first to fourth sensing direction,

wherein the sensing directions and a shaft axis A (FIGS. 32A and 32B) are at least substantially parallel to each other. The first to fourth magnetic field sensors are arranged along the circumference of the load sensor pin 8, 9 having substantially equal distances in circumferential direction between each other.

[0175] The at least one magneto-elastically active regions 21, 22 project along a circumference of the respective load sensing pin 8, 9, wherein the regions are magnetized in such a way that the domain magnetizations in the magnetically polarized regions 21, 22 are in a circumferential direction of the member.

[0176] Turning now to FIG. 32A and FIG. 32B, shown therein are simplified, partial, axial, cross-sectional view diagrams of a load sensor pin 8, 9 for use in a tow coupling apparatus, in which a sensor assembly 1 has a first portion 2 coupled to a second portion 5 via the load sensor pins 8, 9. The first portion 2, which may correspond to the adapter 904, is subject to a first shear force FS1 pointing to the left. The second portion 5, which may correspond to the bracket 902, is exposed to a second and opposite shear force FS2, pointing to the right. The load sensor pin 8, 9 includes a magneto-elastically active region 21, which is arranged at the transition between the first and the second portion 2, 5. Consequently, the active region 21 is subject to shear forces causing the magnetic flux emanating from the magnetically polarized region of said active region 21 to become increasingly helically shaped, when the shear forces FS1, FS2 increase. The sensor means of the load sensor pins 8, 9 includes four direction sensitive magnetic field sensors Lx1, Lx2, Lz1, Lz2 being arranged along the inner circumference of the load sensor pin 8, 9.

[0177] The first direction sensitive sensor Lx1 and the third direction sensitive sensor Lx2 form a first group of magnetic field sensors.

[0178] The second group of sensors consists of the second direction sensitive sensor Lz1 and the fourth direction sensitive sensor Lz2.

[0179] The sensing direction Sx1 of the first sensor Lx1 is 180 degrees opposite to the third sensing direction Sx2 of the third sensor Lx2.

[0180] The first sensing direction Sx1 points out of the paper plane, the third sensing direction Sx2 points into the paper plane.

[0181] Similar to the first group of sensors Lx1, Lx2, the second sensing direction Sz1 and the fourth sensing direction Sz2 are 180 degrees opposite to each other.

[0182] The second and fourth sensor Lz1, Lz2 are arranged accordingly.

[0183] As it is indicated using the commonly known direction signs, the second sensing direction Sz1 points out of the paper plane while the fourth sensing direction Sz2 is directed into the paper plane.

[0184] The second sensor Lz1 (having the second sensing direction Sz1) and the fourth sensor Lz2 (having the fourth sensing direction Sz2) are shown.

[0185] The first sensor Lx1 and the first sensing direction Sx1 are shown solely for clarification of the configuration of the sensors. Naturally, the first sensor Lx1 is not arranged in a common plane with the second and fourth sensor Sz1, Sz2.

[0186] FIG. 32B shows a simplified cross section of a load sensor pin 10 according to another embodiment, which includes a first or upper member 11, which is coupled to a second or lower member 12 via the shaft like member 4. The

upper member 11 is subject to a first shear force FS1 pointing to the left. The lower member 12 is exposed to a second and opposite shear force FS2, pointing to the right. The shaft like member 4 includes an active region 6, which is arranged at the transition between the upper and lower member 11, 12. Consequently, the active region 6 is subject to shear forces causing the magnetic flux emanating from the magnetically polarized region of said active region 6 to become increasingly helically shaped, when the shear forces FS1, FS2 increase. The sensor means of the load sensor pin 10 includes four direction sensitive magnetic field sensors LX1, LX2, LY1, LY2 being arranged along the inner circumference of the shaft like member 4.

[0187] Turning now to FIG. 33, shown therein is a simplified, cross-sectional view diagram of some of the components of a tow coupling apparatus in which the first portion 2 surrounds the second portion 5, which is exposed to a force F. The load sensor pin 8, 9 intersects the first and the second portions 2, 5 along the shaft axis A. The load sensor pin 8, 9 includes a first magneto-elastically active region 261 and a second magneto-elastically active region 262. Similar to the other embodiments of the invention, these regions are directly or indirectly attached to or form a part of the load sensor pin 8, 9 in such a manner that the mechanic stress is transmitted to the active regions 261, 262. The active regions 261, 262 are magnetically polarized in opposite circumferential directions, P61, P62, which are substantially 180 degrees opposite to each other. Furthermore, the directions of polarizations are substantially perpendicular to the shaft axis A.

[0188] A first pair of magnetic field sensors comprising a first sensor L1 and a second sensor L2 arranged inside the load sensor pin 8, 9 in that this pair of sensors cooperates with the first active region 261. Similar, a second pair of magnetic field sensors comprising a first and a second sensor L1* and L2* arranged inside the load sensor pin 8, 9 so as to interact with the second active region 262. The sensors L1, L2 of the first pair and the sensors L1*, L2* of the second pair are arranged approximate the first and the second magneto-elastically active region 261, 262, respectively. The first sensor pair L1, L2 outputs a first signal S, which is illustrated as a voltage V varying with the applied force F in the lower left of FIG. 33. The signal S corresponds to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the first magnetically polarized region 261.

[0189] Similarly, the second pair of magnetic sensors L1*, L2* outputs a second signal S* corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the second magnetically polarized region 262. This signal S* is also a voltage V* varying with the applied F (see lower right of FIG. 33). However, the slope of the second signal S* is opposite to that of the first signal S. A control unit (not shown) of the magneto-elastic sensor assembly is configured for determination of the force F inducing a stress in the load sensor pin 8, 9. The control unit performs a differential evaluation of the signals S and S* of the first pair of sensors L1, L2 and the second pair of sensors L1*, L2*. This differential evaluation advantageously doubles the sensitivity of the signal, which is correlated with the applied stress. Because the polarization P61 and P62 of the first and second magnetically active region 261, 262 is opposite to each other, theoretically possible external fields are compensated. The magneto-elastic sensor assembly according to this embodiment is more sensitive and less susceptible to errors.

[0190] Advantageously, all embodiments of the invention may be equipped with the sensor configuration of FIG. 33 having separate, oppositely polarized active regions 261, 262 and two corresponding sets i.e. pairs of sensors L1, L2 and L1*, L2*.

[0191] Furthermore, the embodiment of FIG. 8 may be equipped with the sensor configuration, which is known from the load pin in FIG. 31B. In other words, the sensor pairs L1, L2 and L1*, L2* may be replaced by a sensor configuration having four sensor pairs Lx11/Lx12, Lx21/Lx22, Lz11/Lz12, Lz21/Lz22. According to this particular embodiment of the invention, additional force vectors may be determined.

[0192] Turning now to FIG. 34, shown therein is a simplified, side, plan view diagram of a portion of the vehicle tow coupling apparatus of FIGS. 28A and 28B showing a first simplified load case. In particular, shown therein are the forces associated with the simplified load case. A force F has a vertical force component Fz in the vertical z-axis direction. The force F is applied to the sensor assembly via the second portion 5, and more precisely via the ball coupling 104 of the drawbar 102. For determining the force component Fz the following set of equations are solved:

$$Fz*d1=Fz1*d2 \quad (10)$$

$$Fz*d3=Fz2*d2 \quad (11)$$

$$Fz=Fz1+Fz2 \quad (12)$$

$$d1=Fz1*d2/(Fz1+Fz2) \quad (13)$$

$$d3=Fz2*d2/(Fz1+Fz2) \quad (14)$$

[0193] Fz1 is a reaction force on the first load sensor pin 8, Fz2 is a reaction force on the second load sensor pin 9. Distance d2 is the distance between (the axes of) the first and the second load sensor pins 8, 9. Distance d1 is the distance between the point of load (the ball coupling 104) and (the axis of) the second load sensor pin 9. Distance d3 is the distance between the point of load and (the axis of) the first load sensor pin 8. An algorithm for solving the above equations may be embedded in/on the memory of one of the aforementioned printed circuit board 304, 604.

[0194] Turning now to FIG. 35, shown therein is a simplified, top view diagram of a portion of a vehicle tow coupling apparatus showing another simplified load case. The force has a transversal force component Fy in the transversal y-axis direction applied to the sensor assembly 1 via the second portion 5, and more precisely via the ball coupling 104 of the drawbar 102. The fourth through-hole 7 provides a degree of freedom in the longitudinal x-axis direction. The transversal force component Fy creates a first reactive force Fx2 acting in the longitudinal x-axis direction on the first magneto-elastically active region 21 of the first load sensor pin 8, and a second reactive force Fx1 acting in the longitudinal x-axis direction on the second magneto-elastically active region 22 of the first load sensor pin 8. For determining the force component Fy, the following set of equations are solved:

$$Fy*d3=Fx1*d2 \quad (15)$$

$$Fy*d3=Fx2*d2 \quad (16)$$

$$Fx1=-Fx2 \quad (17)$$

[0195] Turning now to FIG. 36, shown therein is a simplified, top view diagram of a portion of a vehicle tow coupling apparatus showing another simplified load case. In this case, the force has a longitudinal force component Fx in the longitudinal x-axis direction applied to the sensor assembly 1 via the second portion 5, and more precisely via the ball coupling 104 of the drawbar 102. The fourth through-hole 7 provides a degree of freedom in the longitudinal x-axis direction. The longitudinal force component Fx creates a first reactive force F2 acting in the longitudinal x-axis direction on the first magneto-elastically active region 21 of the first load sensor pin 8, and a second reactive force F1 acting in the longitudinal x-axis direction on the second magneto-elastically active region 22 of the first load sensor pin 8. For determining the force component Fx, the following equation is solved:

$$Fx=Fx1+Fx2 \quad (18)$$

[0196] Turning now to FIG. 37, shown therein is a simplified, cross-sectional end view and plan side view diagram of a vehicle tow coupling apparatus subject to a vertical load component, Fz of a load F. The first load sensor pin 8 includes a first magneto-elastically active region 21 and a second magneto-elastically active region 22 (as shown in FIG. 36) that are directly or indirectly attached to or form parts of the first load sensor pin 8 in such a manner that mechanic stress that is applied to the first load sensor pin 8 is transmitted to the magneto-elastically active regions 21, 22. Each magneto-elastically active region 21, 22 includes a magnetically polarized region. The magnetic polarization of the first magneto-elastically active region 21 and the magnetic polarization of the second magneto-elastically active region 22 can be substantially opposite to each other.

[0197] A magnetic field sensor means includes at least one first direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11 being arranged approximate the first magneto-elastically active region for outputting a first signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the first magnetically polarized region 21, and at least one second direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21 being arranged approximate the second magneto-elastically active region 22 for outputting a second signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the second magnetically polarized region 22.

[0198] The first load sensor pin 8 includes:

[0199] a) a first and a third z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11, Lz12 configured to detect a force component Fz1 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the vertical z-axis direction; and

[0200] b) a second and a fourth z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21, Lz22 configured to detect a force component Fz2 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the vertical z-axis direction.

[0201] The second load sensor pin 9 is a naked pin, i.e. the pin has no magneto-elastically active region and no direction sensitive magnetic field sensors. Differently stated, the first load sensor pin 8 includes at least one first z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11 and at least one second z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21.

[0202] The first and second load sensor pins 8, 9 are rigidly fixed within the first and second through-holes 3, 4 of the first portion 2 (as shown in FIG. 36). The third and the fourth through-holes 6, 7 can provide a minimal gap

between the abutment surfaces of the second portion 5 and the first and second load sensor pins 8, 9.

[0203] Turning now to FIG. 38, shown therein is a simplified, cross-sectional end view and plan side view diagram of a vehicle tow coupling apparatus subject to a vertical, transversal, and longitudinal load components of a load F. In this view, a first load sensor pin 8 includes a first magneto-elastically active region 21 and a second magneto-elastically active region 22, which are directly or indirectly attached to or form parts of the first load sensor pin 8 in such a manner that mechanic stress that is applied to the first load sensor pin 8 is transmitted to the magneto-elastically active regions 21, 22. Each magneto-elastically active region 21, 22 includes a magnetically polarized region. The magnetic polarization of the first magneto-elastically active region 21 and the magnetic polarization of the second magneto-elastically active region 22 can be substantially opposite to each other.

[0204] A magnetic field sensor means includes at least one first and third direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, Lz11 being arranged approximate the first magneto-elastically active region for outputting a first signal and a third signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the first magnetically polarized region 21. The magnetic sensor means further includes at least one second and fourth direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, Lz21 being arranged approximate the second magneto-elastically active region 22 for outputting a second signal and a fourth signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the second magnetically polarized region 22.

[0205] The first load sensor pin 8 may include:

[0206] a) a first and a third z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11, Lz12 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz11 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the z-axis vertical direction;

[0207] b) a second and a fourth z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21, Lz22 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz12 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the z-axis vertical direction;

[0208] c) a first and a third x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, Lx12 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx2 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the longitudinal x-axis direction; and

[0209] d) a second and a fourth x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, Lx22 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx1 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the longitudinal x-axis direction.

[0210] The second load sensor pin 9 may include:

[0211] a) a first and a third z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11, Lz12 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz21 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the vertical z-axis direction; and

[0212] b) a second and a fourth z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21, Lz22 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz22 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0213] Differently stated, the first load sensor pin 8 includes at least one first x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, at least one second x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, at least one first z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11, and the at least one second z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21. The second load sensor pin 9 includes at least

one first z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11 and at least one second z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21.

[0214] As previously described, the first and second load sensor pins 8, 9 are rigidly fixed within the first and second through-holes 3, 4 of the first portion 2. The third and the fourth through-holes 6, 7 can provide a minimal gap between the abutment surfaces of the second portion 5 and the first and second load sensor pins 8, 9.

[0215] Turning now to FIG. 39, shown therein is another simplified, cross-sectional end view and plan side view diagram of a vehicle tow coupling apparatus subject to a vertical, transversal, and longitudinal load components of a load F. In this view, a first load sensor pin 8 includes a first magneto-elastically active region 21 and a second magneto-elastically active region 22, which are directly or indirectly attached to or form parts of the first load sensor pin 8 in such a manner that mechanic stress that is applied to the first load sensor pin 8 is transmitted to the magneto-elastically active regions 21, 22. Each magneto-elastically active region 21, 22 includes a magnetically polarized region. The magnetic polarization of the first magneto-elastically active region 21 and the magnetic polarization of the second magneto-elastically active region 22 can be substantially opposite to each other.

[0216] The magnetic field sensor means of this embodiment includes at least one first and third direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, Lz11 being arranged approximate the first magneto-elastically active region for outputting a first signal and a third signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the first magnetically polarized region 21. The magnetic sensor means further includes at least one second and fourth direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, Lz21 being arranged approximate the second magneto-elastically active region 22 for outputting a second signal and a fourth signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the second magnetically polarized region 22.

[0217] The first load sensor pin 8 includes:

[0218] a) a first and a third z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11, Lz12 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz11 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0219] b) a second and a fourth z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21, Lz22 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz12 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0220] c) a first and a third x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, Lx12 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx2 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the longitudinal x-axis direction; and

[0221] d) a second and a fourth x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, Lx22 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx1 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the longitudinal x-axis direction.

[0222] The second load sensor pin 9 includes:

[0223] a) a first and a third z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11, Lz12 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz21 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0224] b) a second and a fourth z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21, Lz22 configured to detect a

vertical force component Fz22 in the second magneto-elastically active region 22 in the vertical z-axis direction; [0225] c) a first and a third x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, L12 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx10 (force exerted by the load sensor pin 9 in contact with a top surface of the through-hole) in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the longitudinal x-axis direction; and

[0226] d) a second and a fourth x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, Lx22 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx20 (force exerted by the load sensor pin 9 in contact with a top surface of the through-hole) in the second magneto-elastically active region 22 in the longitudinal x-axis direction.

[0227] Therefore, the configuration of the second load sensor pin 9 is substantially similar to the configuration of the first load sensor pin 8. Differently stated, the first load sensor pin 8 includes at least one first x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, at least one the second x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, at least one first z-axis direction magnetic field sensor Lz11, and at least one second z-axis direction magnetic field sensor Lz21. The second load sensor pin includes at least one first x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, at least one second x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, at least one first z-axis direction magnetic field sensor Lz11, and at least one second z-axis direction magnetic field sensor Lz21.

[0228] The first and the second longitudinal force components Fx10, Fx20 are comparatively small (for example, resulting from friction between the abutment surface of the fourth through-hole 7 and the second load sensor pin 9) or substantially zero. This is a direct result of the additional translational degree of freedom in the longitudinal x-axis direction, which degree of freedom is provided by the fourth through-hole 7 in the second portion 5.

[0229] The first and second load sensor pins 8, 9 are rigidly fixed within the first and second through-holes 3, 4 of the first portion 2. The third and the fourth through-holes 6, 7 can provide a minimal gap between the abutment surfaces of the second portion 5 and the first and second load sensor pins 8, 9.

[0230] Turning now to FIG. 40, shown therein is a simplified, cross-sectional end view and plan side view diagram of a vehicle tow coupling apparatus subject to a vertical, transversal, and longitudinal load components of a load F. In this view, the first load sensor pin 8 includes a first magneto-elastically active region 21 and a second magneto-elastically active region 22, which are directly or indirectly attached to or form parts of the first load sensor pin 8 in such a manner that mechanic stress that is applied to the first load sensor pin 8 is transmitted to the magneto-elastically active regions 21, 22. Each magneto-elastically active region 21, 22 includes a magnetically polarized region. The magnetic polarization of the first magneto-elastically active region 21 and the magnetic polarization of the second magneto-elastically active region 22 can be substantially opposite to each other.

[0231] A magnetic field sensor means includes at least one first- and third-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, Lz11 being arranged approximate the first magneto-elastically active region 21 for outputting a first signal and a third signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the first magnetically polarized region 21. The magnetic sensor means further includes at least one

second- and fourth-direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, Lz21 being arranged approximate the second magneto-elastically active region 22 for outputting a second signal and a fourth signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the second magnetically polarized region 22.

[0232] The first load sensor pin 8 includes:

[0233] a) a first and a third z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11, Lz12 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz11 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0234] b) a second and a fourth z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21, Lz22 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz12 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0235] c) a first and a third x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, L12 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx2 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the longitudinal x-axis direction; and

[0236] d) a second and a fourth x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, Lx22 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx1 in the second magneto-elastically active region in the longitudinal x-axis direction.

[0237] The second load sensor pin 9 includes:

[0238] a) a first and a third z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz11, Lz12 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz21 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0239] b) a second and a fourth z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lz21, Lz22 configured to detect a vertical force component Fz22 in the second magneto-elastically active region 22 in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0240] c) a first and a third x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx11, L12 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx22 in the first magneto-elastically active region 21 in the longitudinal x-axis direction; and

[0241] d) a second and a fourth x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor Lx21, Lx22 configured to detect a longitudinal force component Fx21 in the second magneto-elastically active region 22 in the longitudinal x-axis direction.

[0242] The general configuration of the second load sensor pin 9 is substantially similar to the configuration of the first load sensor pin 8. The first and second load sensor pins 8, 9 are rigidly fixed within the first and second through-holes 3, 4 of the first portion 2. The third and the fourth through-holes 6, 7 can provide a minimal gap between the abutment surfaces of the second portion 5 and the first and second load sensor pins 8, 9. Optionally, the fourth through-hole 7 can provide no minimal gap, such that the second load sensor pin 9 is rigidly fixed within the third and the fourth through-hole 7.

[0243] Turning now to FIG. 41, shown therein is another a simplified, cross-sectional end view and plan side view diagram of a vehicle tow coupling apparatus subject to a vertical, transversal, and longitudinal load components of a load F. In this view, the first load sensor pin 8 comprises a first magneto-elastically active region 21 and a second magneto-elastically active region 22, which are directly or indirectly attached to or form parts of the first load sensor pin 8 in such a manner that mechanic stress that is applied to the first load sensor pin 8 is transmitted to the magneto-

elastically active regions **21**, **22**. Each magneto-elastically active region **21**, **22** comprises a magnetically polarized region. The magnetic polarization of the first magneto-elastically active region **21** and the magnetic polarization of the second magneto-elastically active region **22** can be substantially opposite to each other.

[0244] A magnetic field sensor means includes at least one first direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **Lz11** being arranged approximate the first magneto-elastically active region for outputting a first signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the first magnetically polarized region **21**. The magnetic sensor means further includes at least one second direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **Lz21** being arranged approximate the second magneto-elastically active region **22** for outputting a second signal and a fourth signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the second magnetically polarized region **22**.

[0245] The first load sensor pin **8** includes:

[0246] a) a first and a third z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **Lz11**, **Lz12** configured to detect a vertical force component **Fz11** in the first magneto-elastically active region **21** of the first load sensor pin **8** in the vertical z-axis direction; and

[0247] b) a second and a fourth z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **Lz21**, **Lz22** configured to detect a vertical force component **Fz12** in the second magneto-elastically active region of the first load sensor pin **8** in the vertical z-axis direction.

[0248] The first load sensor pin **8** comprises no x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensors.

[0249] The second load sensor pin **9** includes:

[0250] a) a first and a third z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **Lz11**, **Lz12** configured to detect a vertical force component **Fz21** in the first magneto-elastically active region **21** in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0251] b) a second and a fourth z-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **Lz21**, **Lz22** configured to detect a vertical force component **Fz22** in the second magneto-elastically active region **22** in the vertical z-axis direction;

[0252] c) a first and a third x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **Lx11**, **Lx12** configured to detect a longitudinal force component **Fx21** in the first magneto-elastically active region **21** in the longitudinal x-axis direction; and

[0253] d) a second and a fourth x-axis direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **Lx21**, **Lx22** configured to detect a longitudinal force component **Fx22** in the second magneto-elastically active region **22** in the longitudinal x-axis direction.

[0254] The first and second load sensor pins **8**, **9** are rigidly fixed within the first and second through-holes **3**, **4** of the first portion **2**. The third and the fourth through-hole **6**, **7** can provide a minimal gap between the abutment surfaces of the second portion **5** and the first and second load sensor pins **8**, **9**. Optionally, the fourth through-hole **7** can provide no minimal gap, such that the second load sensor pin **9** is rigidly fixed within the third and the fourth through-hole **7**.

[0255] Turning now to FIG. **42A**, shown therein is a simplified, perspective, schematic view diagram of tow coupling apparatus **100** using load sensor pins **8**, **9** for sensing (components) of a force **F**. In the configuration shown, the sensor assembly **1** for sensing a force **F** includes

a first portion **2** (attachment assembly, supporting yoke) having a first and a second through-hole **3**, **4**, and a second portion **5** (trailer hitch, towing hook) having a third and fourth through-hole **6**, **7**. The third and fourth through-holes **6**, **7** are positioned in correspondence to the first and second through-holes **3**, **4**.

[0256] The sensor assembly **1** further includes a first load sensor pin **8** and a second load sensor pin **9**. The first load sensor pin **8** is arranged such that it extends through the first and third through-holes **3**, **6**. The second load sensor pin **9** is arranged such that it extends through the second and fourth through-holes **4**, **7**.

[0257] The first portion **2** is coupled to the second portion **5** via the first and second load sensor pins **8**, **9**. At least one out of the first and the second load sensor pin **8**, **9** includes at least one magneto-elastically active region **10** that is directly or indirectly attached to or forms a part of the load sensor pin **8**, **9** in such a manner that mechanic stress on the load sensor pin is transmitted to the magneto-elastically active region. The magneto-elastically active region **10** comprises at least one magnetically polarized region such that a polarization of the polarized region becomes increasingly helically shaped as the applied stress increases.

[0258] The at least one load sensor pin **8**, **9** further includes a magnetic field sensor means arranged approximate the at least one magneto-elastically active region **10** for outputting a signal corresponding to a stress-induced magnetic flux emanating from the magnetically polarized region. The magnetic field sensor means includes at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **L**, which is configured for determination of a shear force in at least one direction. The at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **L** is arranged to have a predetermined and fixed spatial coordination with the load sensor pin **8**, **9**.

[0259] The load sensor pin **8**, **9** comprising the at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **L** is at least partially hollow. The at least one direction sensitive magnetic field sensor **L** is arranged inside the interior of the load sensor pin **8**, **9**.

[0260] The first and second load sensor pins **8**, **9** are substantially arranged along the vertical z-axis direction. The load sensor pins **8**, **9** extend in the transversal y-axis direction. The longitudinal direction is perpendicular to the vertical z-axis direction and the transversal y-axis direction to define the Cartesian coordinate system. The system of equations that has to be solved in order to determine the respective load components of **F**, has to be altered accordingly.

[0261] Further features and aspects of the invention (which have been described with respect to the preceding embodiments) may also apply to this embodiment.

[0262] The sensor assembly **1** is part of a tow coupling apparatus **100**. The first part **2** is configured to be attached to the chassis of a towing vehicle. The second part **5** provides a ball coupling **104** that is configured to couple to a towed vehicle.

[0263] Turning now to FIG. **42B** and FIG. **42C**, shown therein are simplified, perspective, schematic view diagrams of tow coupling apparatus **100** using load sensor pins **8**, **9** for sensing (components) of a force **F**. In these embodiments, the load sensor pins **8**, **9**, along with the first part **2** and second part **5** (not shown), are integrated into the existing hitch mechanism with the load sensor pins **8**, **9** arrange in the

transverse y-axis direction (perpendicular to the force F acting in the x-axis direction).

[0264] Turning now to FIG. 42D through FIG. 42K, shown therein are simplified, perspective, schematic view diagrams of tow coupling apparatus 100 using load sensor pins 8, 9 for sensing (components) of a force F. In these embodiments, the load sensor pins 8, 9, along with the first part 2 and second part 5 (not shown), are integrated into the existing hitch mechanism with the load sensor pins 8, 9 arrange in the transverse y-axis direction as shown (perpendicular to the force F acting in the x-axis direction). In some cases, an exterior housing further protects the components of the tow coupling apparatus 100 from rain, snow, ice, and other environment conditions.

[0265] Turning now to FIG. 42L and FIG. 42O, shown therein is a simplified, perspective, schematic view diagram of tow coupling apparatus 100 using load sensor pins 8, 9 for sensing (components) of a force F. In these embodiments, the load sensor pins 8, 9, along with the first part 2 and second part 5 (not shown), are integrated into the existing hitch mechanism with the load sensor pins 8, 9 arrange in the longitudinal x-axis direction as shown (parallel to the force F acting in the x-axis direction). Other load sensing pins 8, 9 could be positioned in the transverse direction to better measure the F_x force in the x-axis direction.

[0266] Turning now to FIG. 42P, shown therein is a simplified, perspective, schematic view diagram of coupling devices (“kingpin,” extender, 3-inch ball, high-rise ball, inverted ball, and eyelet for use with a gooseneck-style trailer hitch (not shown), and fifth wheel-style hitch) adapted to using one or more load sensor pins 8, 9 for sensing (components) of a force F acting on the coupling devices. FIG. 42Q through FIG. 42U show one of the coupling devices of FIG. 42P and the locations for positioning the load sensor pins 8, 9 (usually in the transverse direction) for sensing (components) of a force F acting on the coupling devices. As shown, the coupling devices may include a hitch tube (which may be a solid bar) attached to a towing vehicle, a receiver tube attached to the hitch tube/bar, a drawbar (which may be straight, curved) inserted in the receiver tube or attached directly to the hitch tube/bar, and a ball hitch.

[0267] Turning now to FIG. 42V, shown therein is a simplified, exploded, schematic view diagram of a weight sensor assembly 410 using load sensor pins 8, 9 for sensing a weight of a towed and a towing vehicle for comparison to a predetermined value, such as a manufacturer’s maximum weight limit or a US governmental gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR). A “sprung weight” is the weight of a mass resting on the suspension of a vehicle or a trailer, not the total weight (the total weight would include the wheels, tires, brakes, and certain suspension components). As shown in the figure, the load sensor pins 8, 9 are positioned such that the sheer force exerted downward by the connection device 412 (which could be a chassis or vehicle body part) and transferred to the vehicle wheels causes a force to be applied to the load pins 8, 9. The bracket 902, which may be connected to the spring or other suspension component on the one end, and adapters 904, which may be attached to the connection device 412 and the towing or the towed vehicle chassis, may be used to output a signal (as described above) that approximates the sprung weight by measuring the force of the mass of the vehicle as its weight force is transferred to the load sensor pins 8, 9. For example, the sensor assembly 410 could be positioned between the top of each

of the four suspension springs associated with the wheels where the springs attach to the vehicle chassis.

[0268] FIGS. 42W through 42AA show various towed vehicles and towing vehicles and related components, including suspension components, equipped with the weight sensor assembly 410 at various measurement points between a vehicle body or vehicle load (e.g., trailer box, boat) and the vehicle’s wheels to measure a sprung weight force.

[0269] FIG. 42W for example, illustrates use of the weight sensor assembly 410 positioned near a trailer wheel such that the weight sensor assembly 410 is between the trailer box on one end and the wheel axel (or wheel suspension component attached to the wheel), such that the weight of the trailer box may be measured from a force arising from the weight of the trailer box being transferred to the load sensor pins 8, 9. FIG. 42X illustrates a similar use of the weight sensor assembly 410 on a smaller trailer.

[0270] FIG. 42Y illustrates use of the weight sensor assembly 410 positioned near a trailer wheel of a boat trailer such that the weight sensor assembly 410 is between the trailer on one end and the wheel axel (or wheel suspension component attached to the wheel), such that the weight of the boat and boat trailer may be measured from a force arising from the weight of the boat and boat trailer being transferred to the load sensor pins 8, 9.

[0271] FIG. 42Z illustrates use of the weight sensor assembly 410 positioned near the three connection points of a leaf spring of a vehicle such that a weight sensor assembly 410 is between each of the two ends of the leaf spring and the vehicle body above, and another weight sensor assembly 410 is between the middle of the leaf spring and the wheel axel, such that the weight of the vehicle body may be measured from respective forces arising from the weight of the body being transferred to the load sensor pins 8, 9 associated with the three weight sensor assemblies 410.

[0272] FIG. 42AA illustrates use of the weight sensor assembly 410 positioned near two connection points of a vehicle suspension device such that one weight sensor assembly 410 is between the top of a spring and the vehicle body above, and the other weight sensor assembly 410 is between the bottom of the spring and a vehicle wheel, such that the weight of the vehicle body may be measured from respective forces arising from the weight of the body being transferred to the load sensor pins 8, 9 associated with the weight sensor assemblies 410.

[0273] A method of using the sensor assembly 410 and the components shown in the various embodiments described above include connecting the electronics of the load sensor pins 8, 9 to an electrical connection point of the towed and/or the towing vehicle such that electrical signals having information useful for calculating the (components) of a force F or having information about a calculated force F may be transferred to the vehicles. The signals may be transferred by wired or wirelessly using a transceiver associated with the towing or towed vehicle. The method further includes continuously comparing the calculated force F (and its components) to one or more ratings or limits and outputting an alert if a calculated values exceeds the ratings or limits. Ratings and limits may be expressed in terms of maximum values, maximum values with a safety margin, or a distribution of values, such as a histogram, that account for inputs from other vehicle sensors and operating conditions that affect the ratings and limits (e.g., external air temperature, vehicle

traction setting, engine performance, tire pressure, payload amount (including number of vehicle passengers), and others.

Example

[0274] A computation for a tow vehicle is shown below:
Gwc (weight-carrying hitch rating)=12,500 lbs

Gym (Gross Vehicle Mass (GVWR)–Max Payload w/
Weight Truck)=7,850 lbs

$D = Gwc * (Gvm + 5004.5) / (Gvm + Gwc) = 1875$ lbs

Twc=1875 lbs

Longitudinal (Aft/Fore) Loads

Aft (Toward Rear):

[0275] 5922 lbs (0-100 cycles)

[0276] 4738 lbs (101-500 cycles)

[0277] 3948 lbs (501-5000 cycles)

Fore (Toward Front):

[0278] –2685 lbs (0-100 cycles)

[0279] –2685 lbs (101-500 cycles)

[0280] –1579 lbs (501-5000 cycles)

Vertical (Up/Down) Loads

Up (Toward Sky)

[0281] –296 lbs (0-100 cycles)

[0282] –454 lbs (101-500 cycles)

[0283] –612 lbs (501-5000 cycles)

Down (Toward Earth)

[0284] –3217 lbs (0-100 cycles)

[0285] –3059 lbs (101-500 cycles)

[0286] –2901 lbs (501-5000 cycles)

Starting at –1875 lbs (cycling between the loads mentioned above)

Lateral (Side to Side) Loads

[0287] Side (+/–)=790 lbs (Cycle at 1 Hz for 60,000 cycles in conjunction w/ known histogram distribution)

[0288] Although certain presently preferred embodiments of the disclosed invention have been specifically described herein, it will be apparent to those skilled in the art to which the invention pertains that variations and modifications of the various embodiments shown and described herein may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. Accordingly, it is intended that the invention be limited only to the extent required by the appended claims and the applicable rules of law.

We claim:

1. A vehicle comprising:

a trailer hitch receiver configured to receive a trailer hitch arm along an axis;

two magnetoelastic pins, having respective magnetic fields, configured to couple the trailer hitch receiver to a chassis, the two magnetoelastic pins disposed above and perpendicular to the axis;

a plurality of sensors corresponding to the two magnetoelastic pins, configured to detect changes in the respective magnetic fields; and

a processor configured to determine a magnitude and a direction of a force acting on the trailer hitch receiver based on data from the plurality of sensors.

2. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the two magnetoelastic pins are further configured to flex based on the magnitude and the direction of the force acting on the trailer hitch receiver, wherein the plurality of sensors are configured to detect respective changes in the magnetic fields corresponding to an amount of flex of the two magnetoelastic pins.

3. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein one or both of the two magnetoelastic pins are configured to flex based on a vertical force, a lateral force, a longitudinal force, and a rotational force acting on the trailer hitch receiver, wherein the vertical force, the lateral force, and the longitudinal force are perpendicular to each other.

4. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the processor is further configured to:

determine that a first pin of the two magnetoelastic pins has flexed in a first direction;

determine that a second pin of the two magnetoelastic pins has flexed in a second direction opposite the first direction; and

responsively determine that a vertical force is acting on the trailer hitch receiver.

5. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the trailer hitch receiver includes an opening configured to engage the trailer hitch arm along the axis, and wherein the two magnetoelastic pins include a first magnetoelastic pin and a second magnetoelastic pin centered on the axis.

6. The vehicle of claim 5, wherein the first magnetoelastic pin is configured to couple the trailer hitch receiver to the chassis using a circular coupling, and the second magnetoelastic pin is configured to couple the trailer hitch receiver to the chassis using an oblong coupling.

7. The vehicle of claim 6, wherein the second magnetoelastic pin is configured to slide within the oblong coupling in response to a longitudinal force, and wherein the processor is further configured to:

determine that the first magnetoelastic pin has flexed in a first direction by a first amount;

determine that the second magnetoelastic pin has flexed in the first direction by a second amount;

responsively determine that the longitudinal force is acting on the trailer hitch receiver; and

determine a magnitude of the longitudinal force based on a differential between the first amount and the second amount.

8. The vehicle of claim 6, wherein the plurality of sensors includes two or more sensors corresponding to each of the first and second magnetoelastic pins.

9. The vehicle of claim 8, wherein the processor is further configured to:

determine, based on the two or more sensors corresponding to the first magnetoelastic pin, that a first end of the first magnetoelastic pin flexes in a first direction, and a second end of the first magnetoelastic pin flexes in a second direction opposite the first direction; and

responsively determine that a lateral force is acting on the trailer hitch receiver.

10. The vehicle of claim 8, wherein the processor is further configured to:

determine, based on the two or more sensors corresponding to the first magnetoelastic pin, that a first end of the first magnetoelastic pin flexes in a first direction, and a second end of the first magnetoelastic pin flexes in a second direction opposite the first direction;

determine, based on the two or more sensors corresponding to the second magnetoelastic pin, that a first end of the second magnetoelastic pin flexes in the first direction, and a second end of the second magnetoelastic pin flexes in the second direction opposite the first direction; and

responsively determine that a rotational force is acting on the trailer hitch receiver.

11. The vehicle of claim **5**, wherein the processor is further configured to determine all directional components of the force based on data received from the plurality of sensors.

12. The vehicle of claim **1**, wherein the processor is further configured to estimate a mass of a trailer coupled to the trailer hitch receiver based on the magnitude of the force.

13. The vehicle of claim **1**, wherein the processor is further configured to transmit the magnitude and the direction of the force for display on a remote computing device.

14. A method for determining a force acting on a trailer hitch receiver comprising:

determining, via a plurality of sensors corresponding to two magnetoelastic pins coupling the trailer hitch receiver to a chassis of a vehicle, respective changes in magnetic fields corresponding to the two magnetoelastic pins, the two magnetoelastic pins disposed above the trailer hitch receiver;

receiving, by a vehicle processor, data corresponding to the respective changes in the magnetic fields; and

responsively determining, by the vehicle processor, a magnitude and direction of the force acting on the trailer hitch receiver based on the data.

15. The method of claim **14**, further comprising:

determining that a first pin of the two magnetoelastic pins has flexed in a first direction;

determining that a second pin of the two magnetoelastic pins has flexed in a second direction opposite the first direction; and

responsively determining that a vertical force is acting on the trailer hitch receiver.

16. The method of claim **14**, wherein

(i) the trailer hitch receiver includes an opening configured to engage a trailer hitch arm along an axis,

(ii) the two magnetoelastic pins include first and second magnetoelastic pins oriented perpendicular to and centered on the axis,

(iii) the first magnetoelastic pin is configured to couple the trailer hitch receiver to the chassis using a circular coupling, and

(iv) the second magnetoelastic pin is configured to couple the trailer hitch receiver to the chassis using an oblong coupling.

17. The method of claim **16**, wherein the second magnetoelastic pin is configured to slide within the oblong coupling in response to a longitudinal force, the method further comprising:

determining that the first magnetoelastic pin has flexed in a first direction by a first amount;

determining that the second magnetoelastic pin has flexed in the first direction by a second amount;

responsively determining that the longitudinal force is acting on the trailer hitch receiver; and

determining a magnitude of the longitudinal force based on a differential between the first amount and the second amount.

18. The method of claim **16**, wherein the plurality of sensors includes two or more sensors corresponding to each of the first and second magnetoelastic pins, the method further comprising:

determining, based on the two or more sensors corresponding to the first magnetoelastic pin, that a first end of the first magnetoelastic pin flexes in a first direction, and a second end of the first magnetoelastic pin flexes in a second direction opposite the first direction; and responsively determining that a lateral force is acting on the trailer hitch receiver.

19. The method of claim **16**, wherein the plurality of sensors includes two or more sensors corresponding to each of the first and second magnetoelastic pins, the method further comprising:

determining, based on the two or more sensors corresponding to the first magnetoelastic pin, that a first end of the first magnetoelastic pin flexes in a first direction, and a second end of the first magnetoelastic pin flexes in a second direction opposite the first direction;

determining, based on the two or more sensors corresponding to the second magnetoelastic pin, that a first end of the second magnetoelastic pin flexes in the first direction, and a second end of the second magnetoelastic pin flexes in the second direction opposite the first direction; and

responsively determine that a rotational force is acting on the trailer hitch receiver.

20. The method of claim **14**, further including:

estimating a mass of a trailer coupled to the trailer hitch receiver based on the magnitude of the force.

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