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Shielded Mars Balloon Launcher (SMBL) deployment sequence

Aurora Awarded Contract by NASA to Study Balloon Launches From the Surface of Mars

Cambridge, MA, February 17, 2009 – NASA has awarded Aurora Flight Sciences and its partner Vertigo Inc, a Small Business Innovative Research (SBIR) Phase I contract to develop an innovative autonomous balloon launcher to operate from the surface of Mars. Aurora envisions a compact lightweight system that could be included on future Mars landers, thereby augmenting the mission with a small aerial vehicle. Such a system would have potential for atmospheric sampling and video data capture unavailable on current Mars missions.

Balloon-based Mars exploration has the capability to cover a larger portion of the Martian surface than is accessible via a rover and to provide better resolution than is available from satellites. Balloons could be used to measure atmospheric data at different altitudes and locations on Mars. According to the project’s manager, George Kiwada, “A major challenge to ground deployment is the possibility of the envelope being damaged by winds, surrounding rocks, or parts of the associated lander. Our Shielded Mars Balloon Launcher (SMBL) concept addresses this challenge by using inflatable structures to provide a safe environment for balloon inflation and deployment.”

The SMBL contract builds on Aurora’s previous work with NASA on the development of a Mars airplane. In that project, Aurora became familiar with the challenges of aerial vehicle operations in the Martian atmosphere.

About Aurora Flight Sciences

Aurora Flight Sciences designs and builds robotic aircraft and other advanced aerospace vehicles for scientific and military applications. Aurora is headquartered in Manassas, VA and operates production plants in Bridgeport, WV and Columbus, MS and a Research and Development Center in Cambridge, MA. To view recent press releases and more about Aurora please visit our web site at www.aurora.aero.

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