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Bogursky et al.

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(54) **APPARATUS AND METHODS FOR FILAMENT CRIMPING AND MANUFACTURING**

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Related U.S. Application Data

(62) Division of application No. 12/829,208, filed on Jul. 1, 2010, now Pat. No. 8,113,243, which is a division of application No. 12/691,562, filed on Jan. 21, 2010, now Pat. No. 7,926,520, which is a division of application No. 11/473,567, filed on Jun. 22, 2006, now Pat. No. 7,650,914.

(51) **Int. Cl.**

B21F 1/00	(2006.01)
H01R 43/048	(2006.01)
H01R 4/18	(2006.01)
H01R 4/01	(2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC ***H01R 43/048*** (2013.01); ***H01R 4/188*** (2013.01); *H01R 4/01* (2013.01)

USPC **140/105**

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

USPC 140/105, 106, 113; 72/306, 307, 72/381–384

See application file for complete search history.

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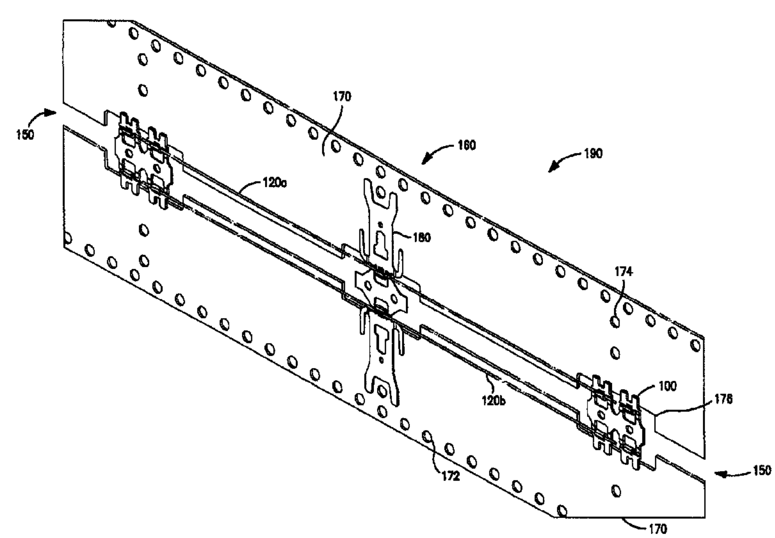
(57) **ABSTRACT**

Apparatus and methods for filament crimping. In one embodiment, the apparatus comprises a body and a filament crimp element. The filament crimp element comprises a first set of cavities disposed at a spacing which creates a first set of features and a second set of cavities disposed at a spacing which creates a second set of features. The first and second set cavities are substantially opposite one another. The first set of features are adapted to be placed at least partially within the second set of cavities and the second set of features are adapted to be placed at least partially within the first set of cavities. Methods and apparatus for the manufacture of the device are also disclosed. In addition, methods for automated placement and manufacture of assemblies using the crimp elements are also disclosed.

17 Claims, 25 Drawing Sheets



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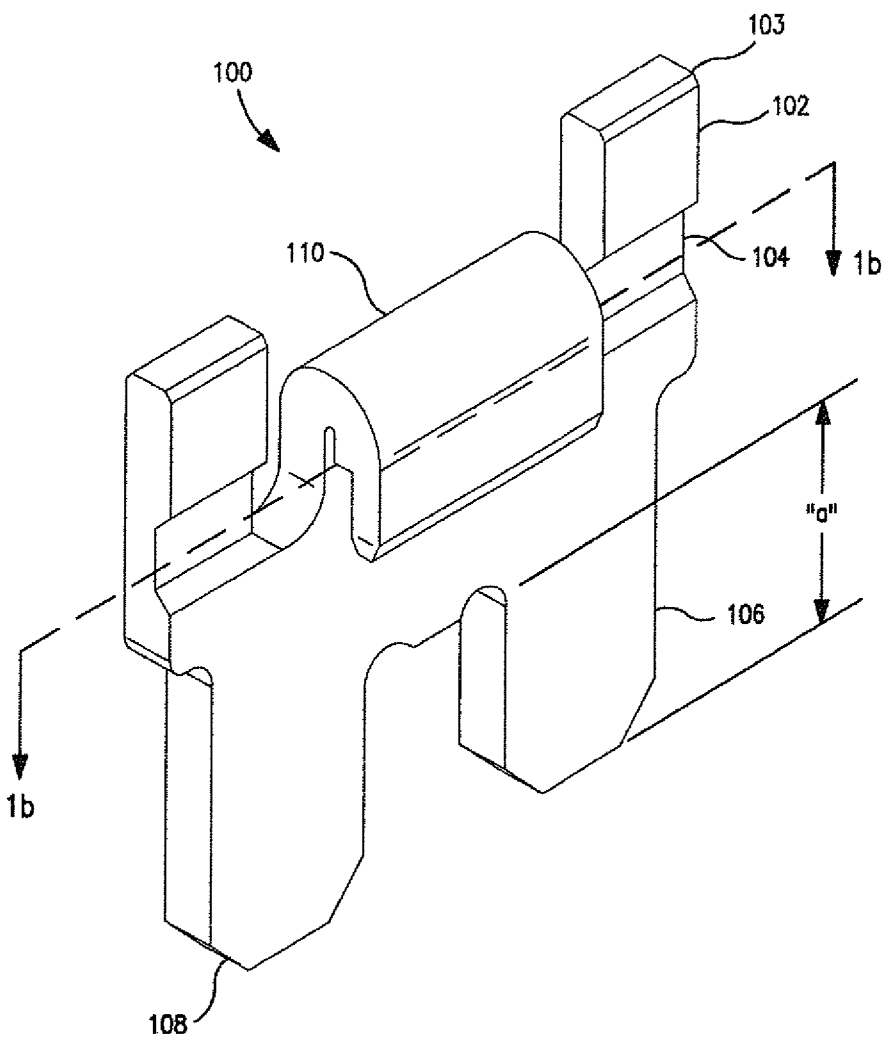


FIG. 1

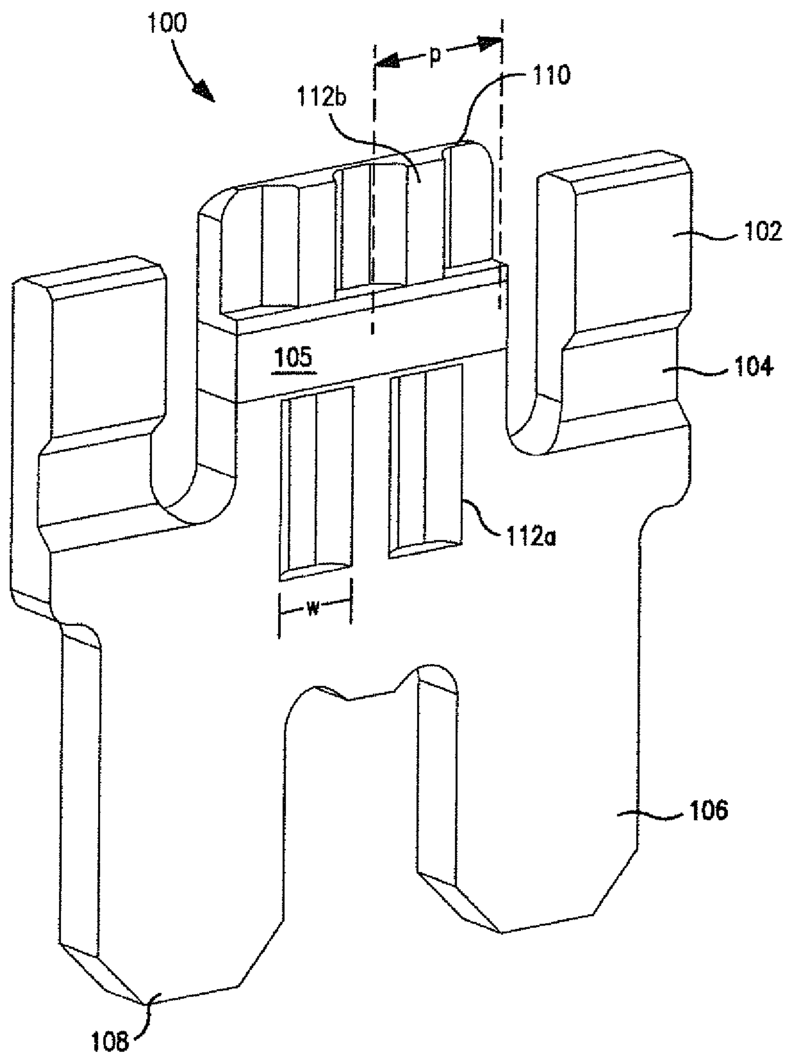


FIG. 1a

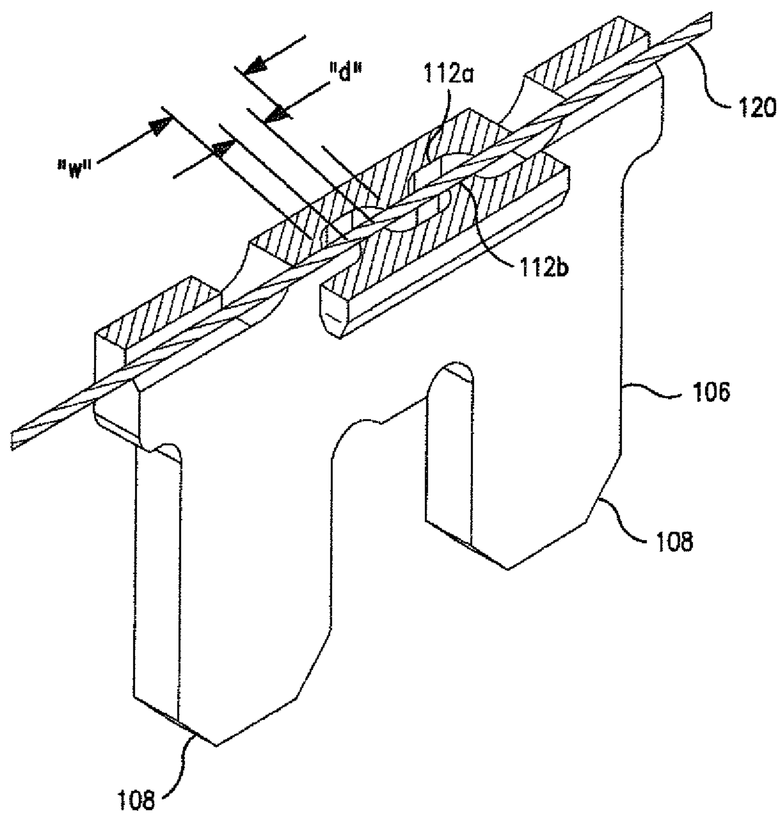


FIG. 1b

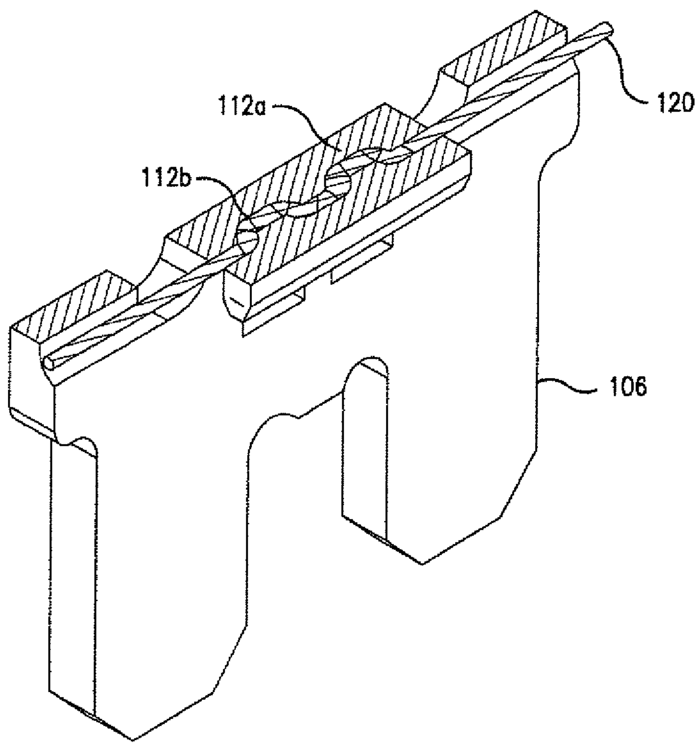


FIG. 1c

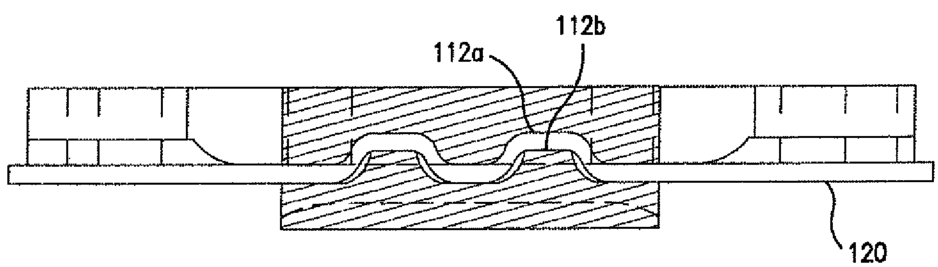


FIG. 1d

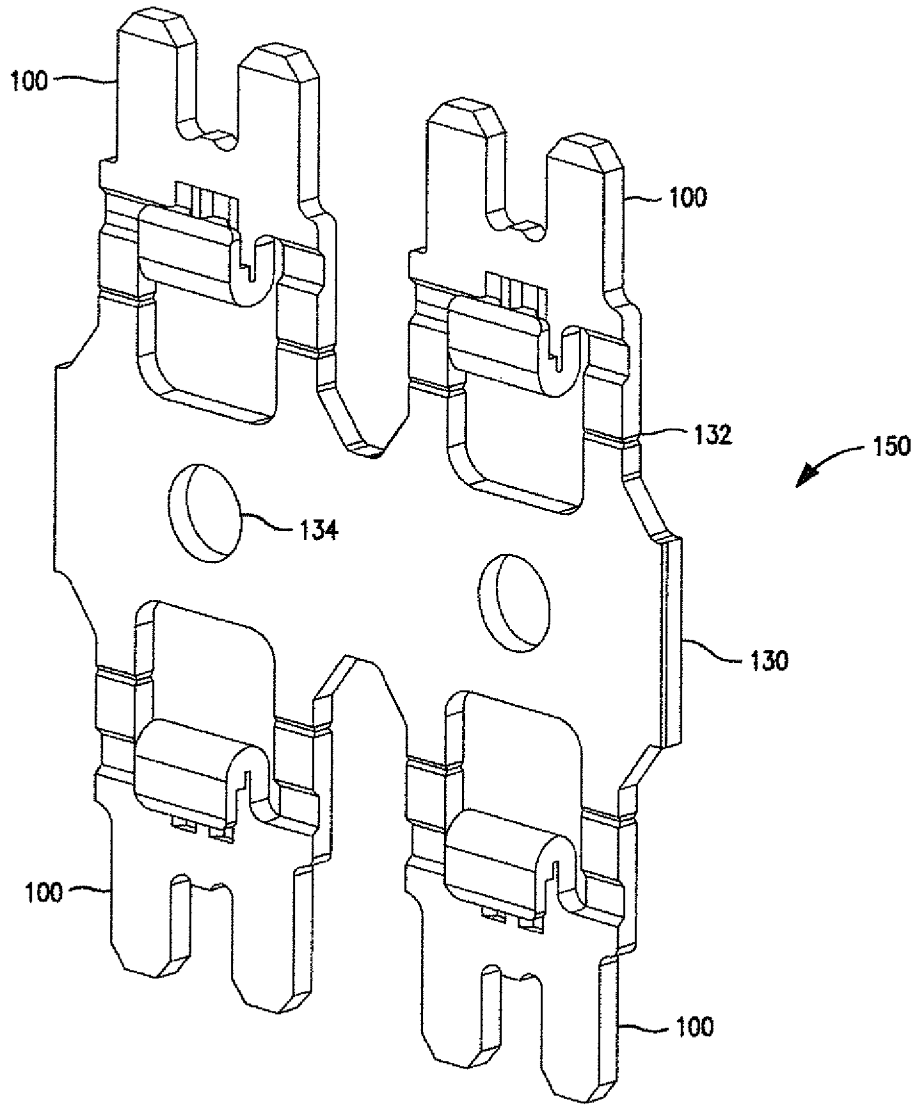


FIG. 1e

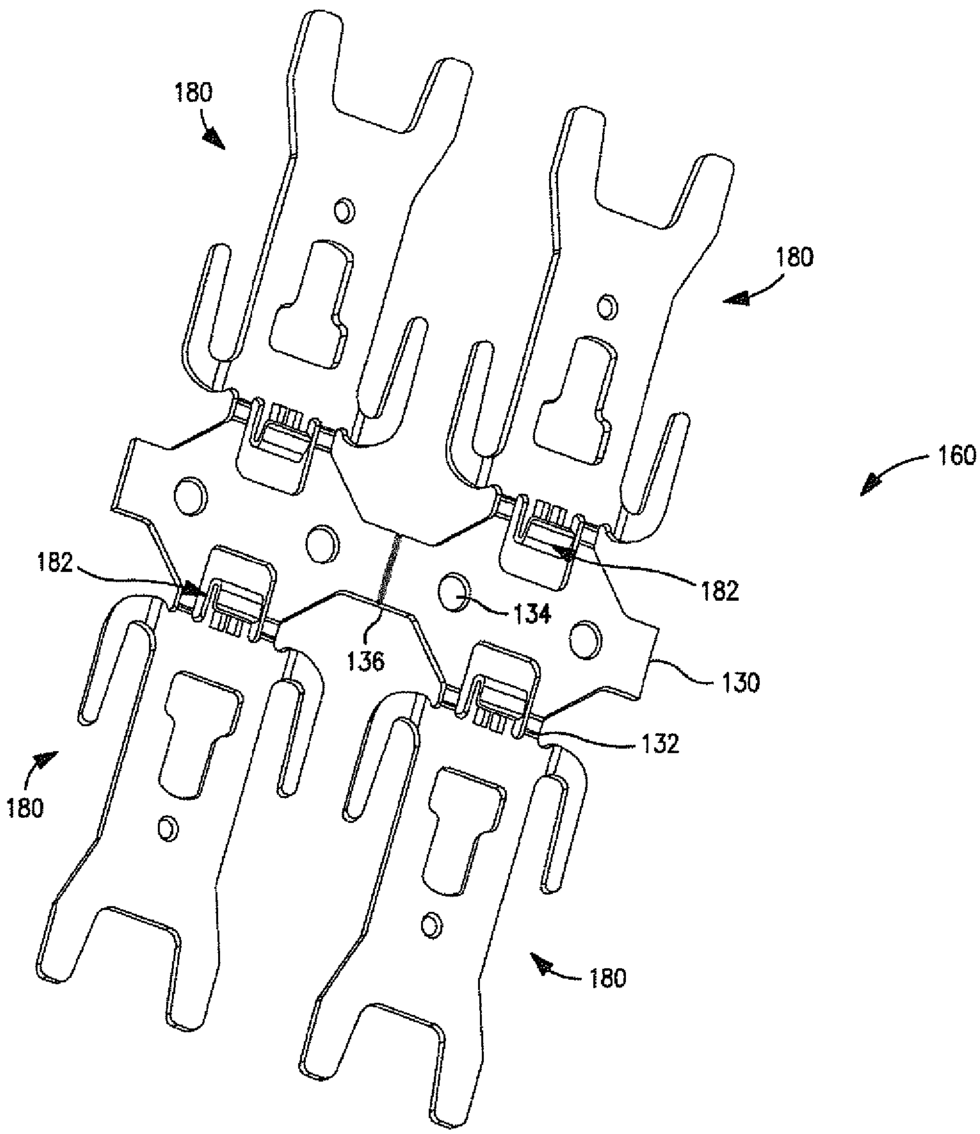


FIG. 1f

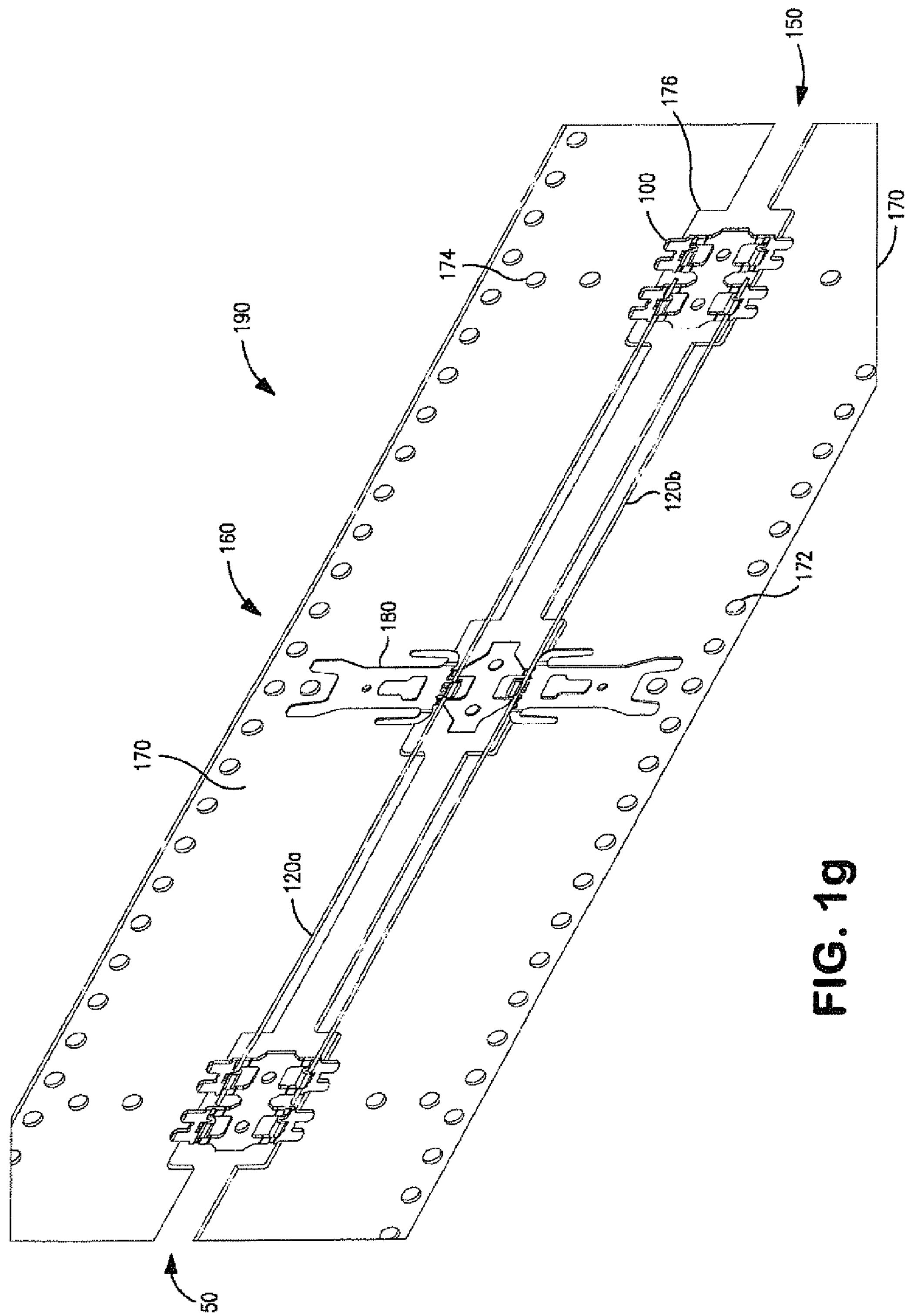


FIG. 1g

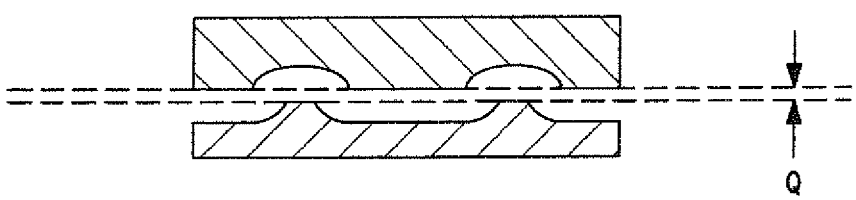


FIG. 1h

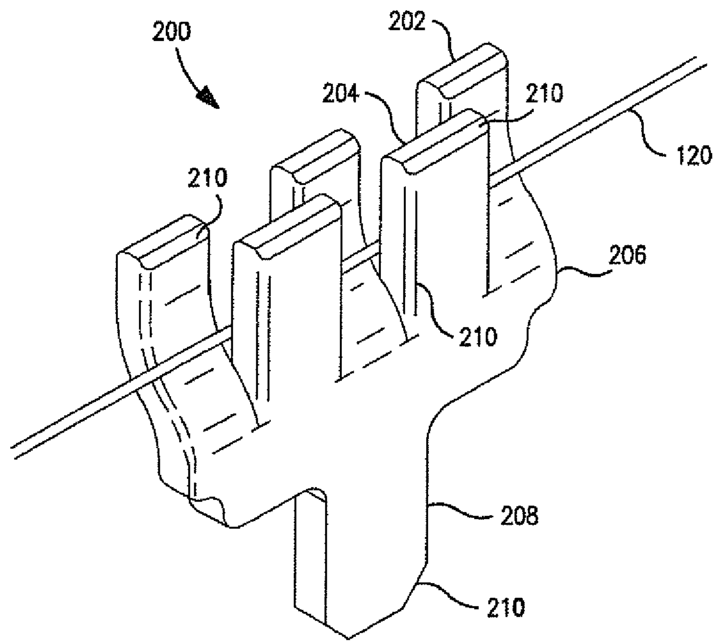


FIG. 2

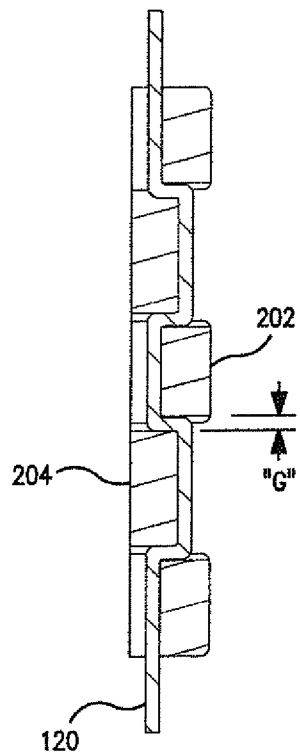


FIG. 2a

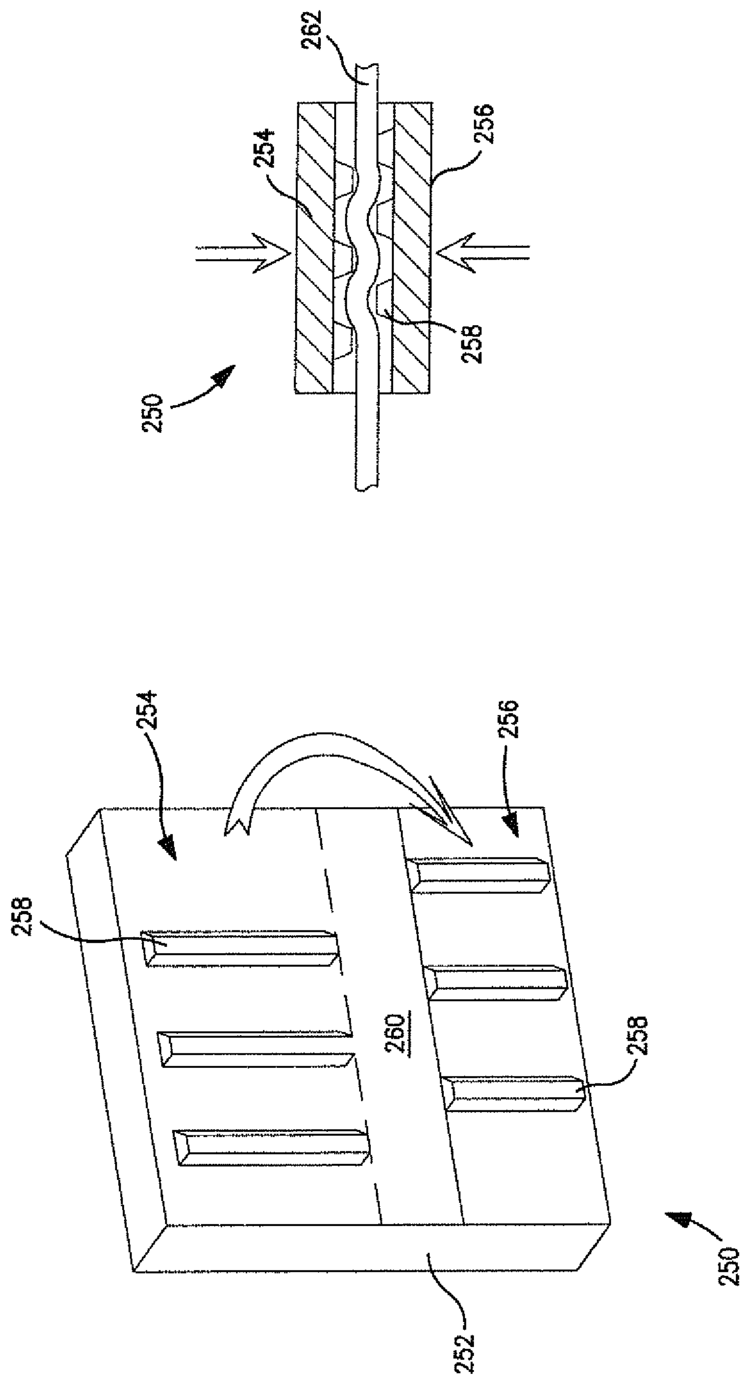


FIG. 2b

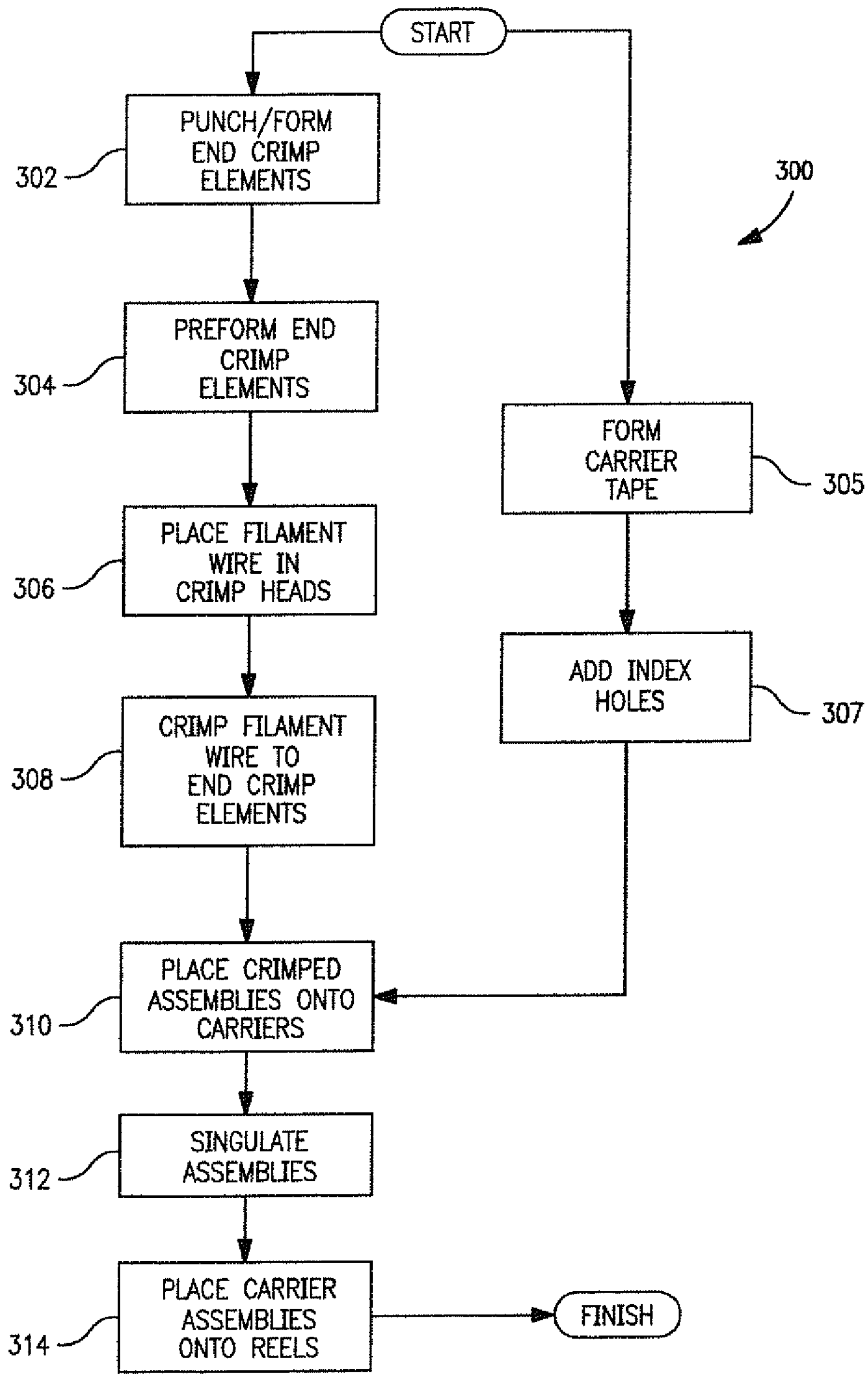
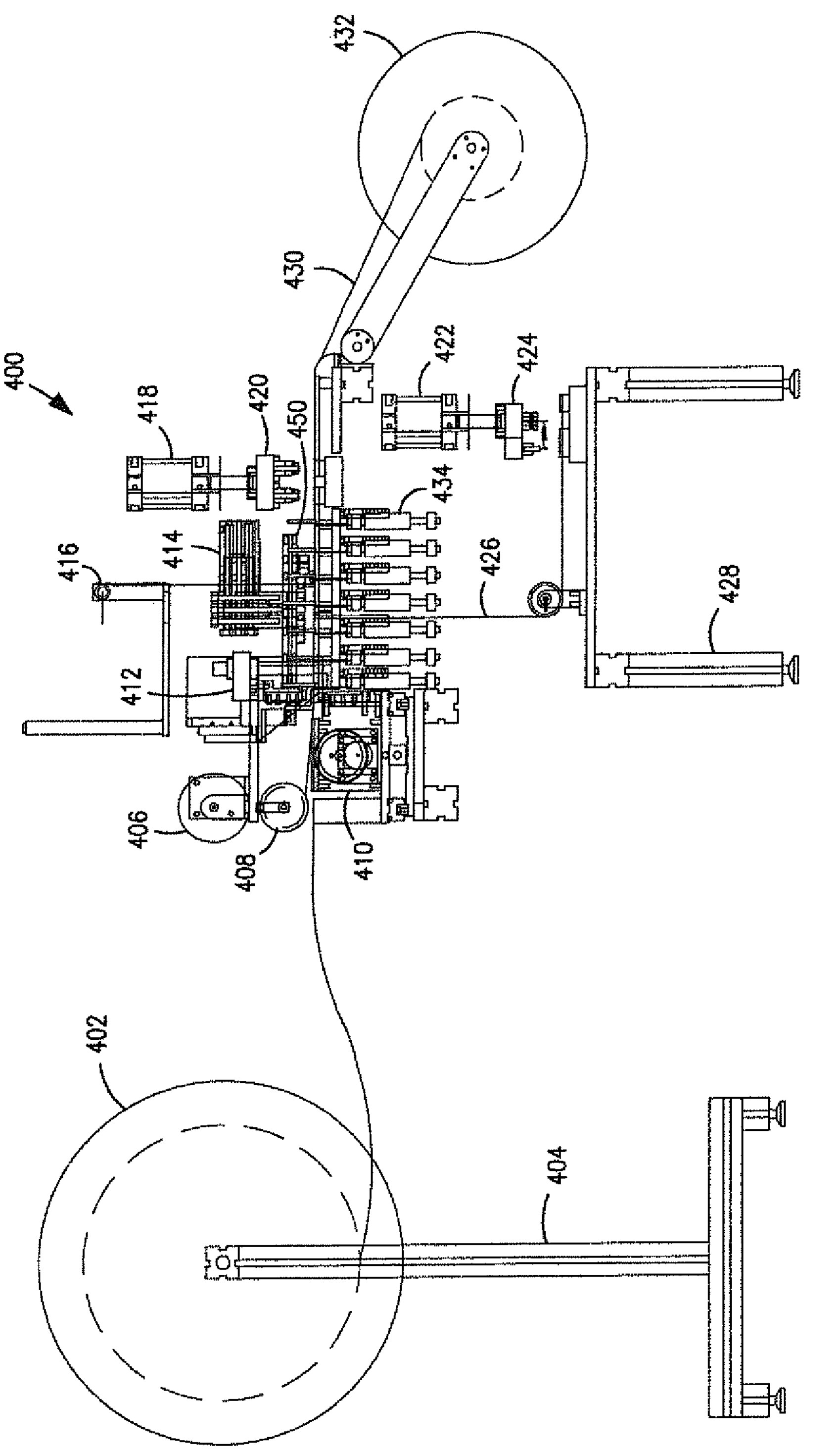

START
PUNCH/FORM END CRIMP ELEMENTS
302
300
PREFORM END CRIMP ELEMENTS
304
FORM CARRIER TAPE
305
PLACE FILAMENT WIRE IN CRIMP HEADS
306
ADD INDEX HOLES
307
CRIMP FILAMENT WIRE TO END CRIMP ELEMENTS
308
PLACE CRIMPED ASSEMBLIES ONTO CARRIERS
310
SINGULATE ASSEMBLIES
312
PLACE CARRIER ASSEMBLIES ONTO REELS
314
FINISH

FIG. 3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402
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408
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412
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416
418
420
422
424
426
428
430
432
434
450

FIG. 4

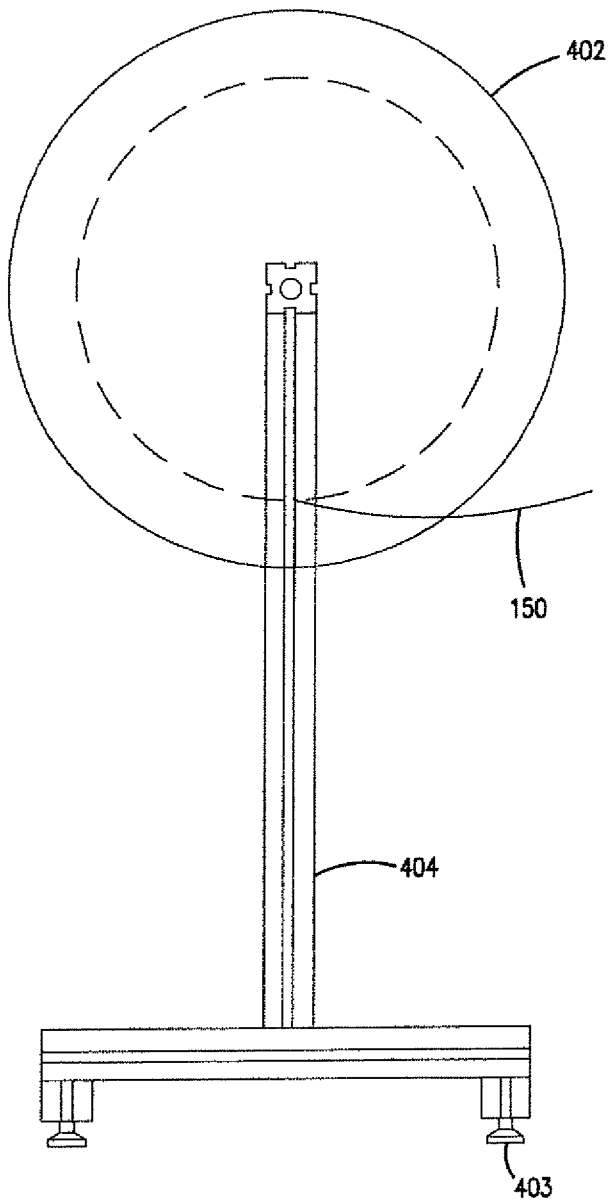
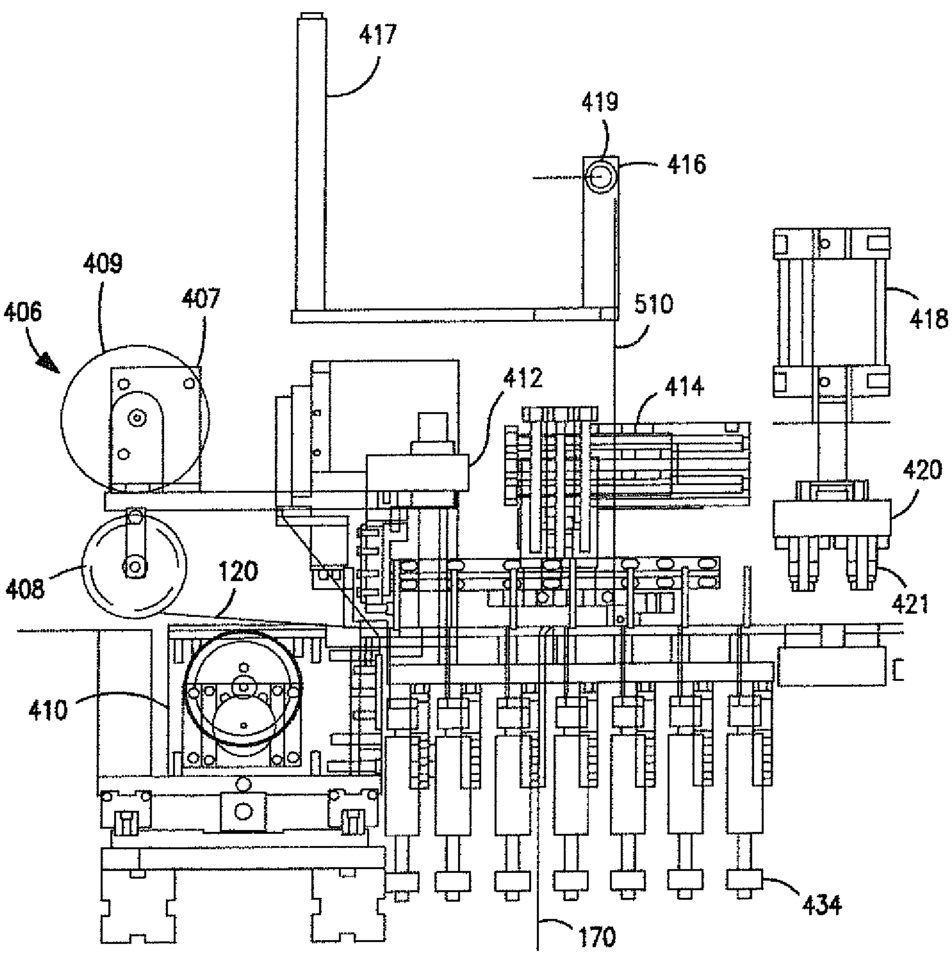


FIG. 4a


417
419
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409
407
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510
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412
414
420
408
120
421
410
434
170

FIG. 4b

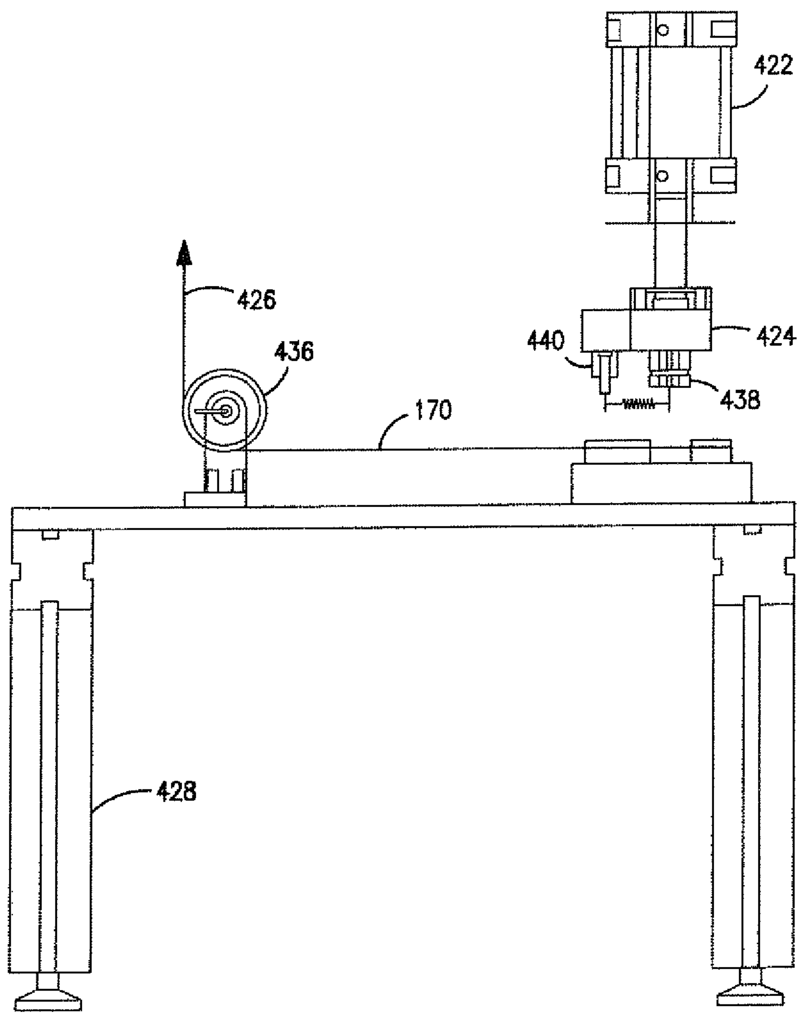


FIG. 4c

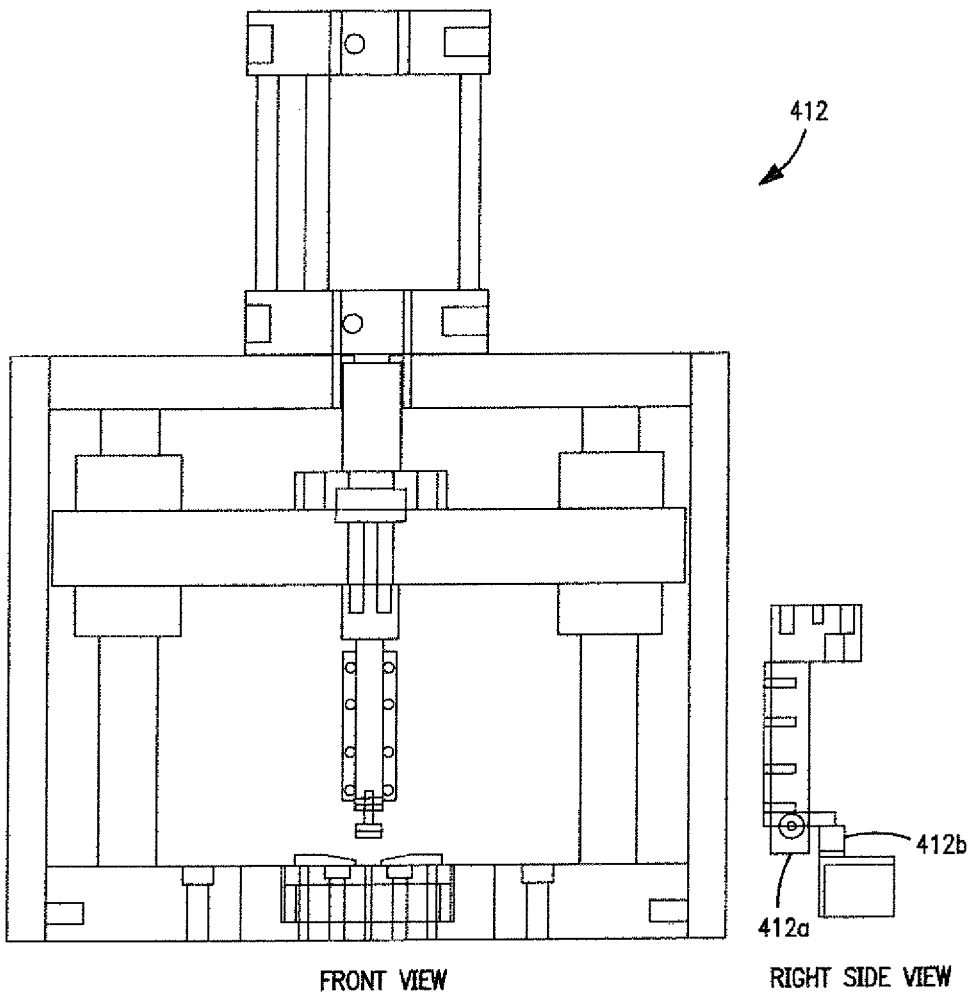


FIG. 4d

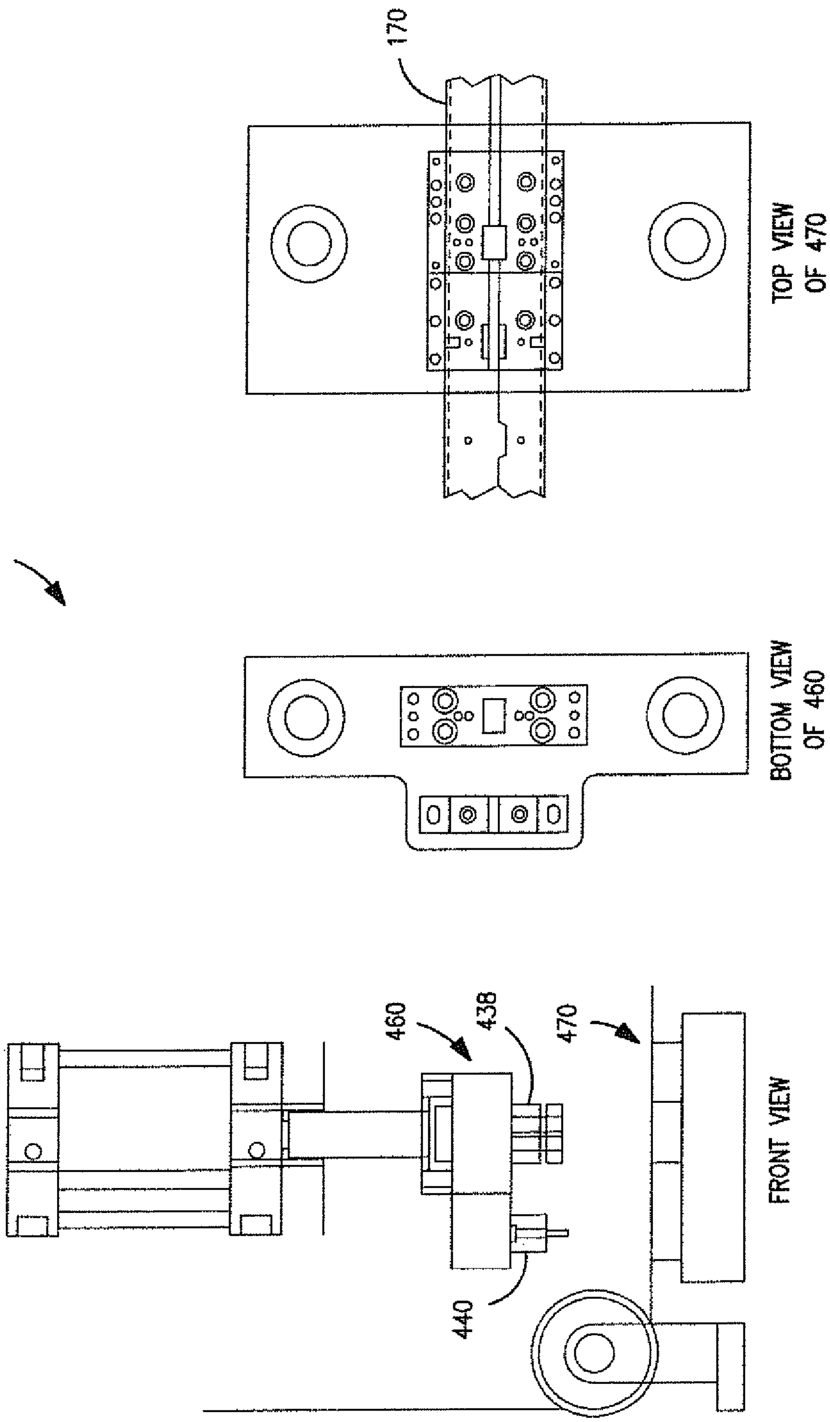

170
TOP VIEW OF 470
424
BOTTOM VIEW OF 460
460
438
470
440
FRONT VIEW

FIG. 4e

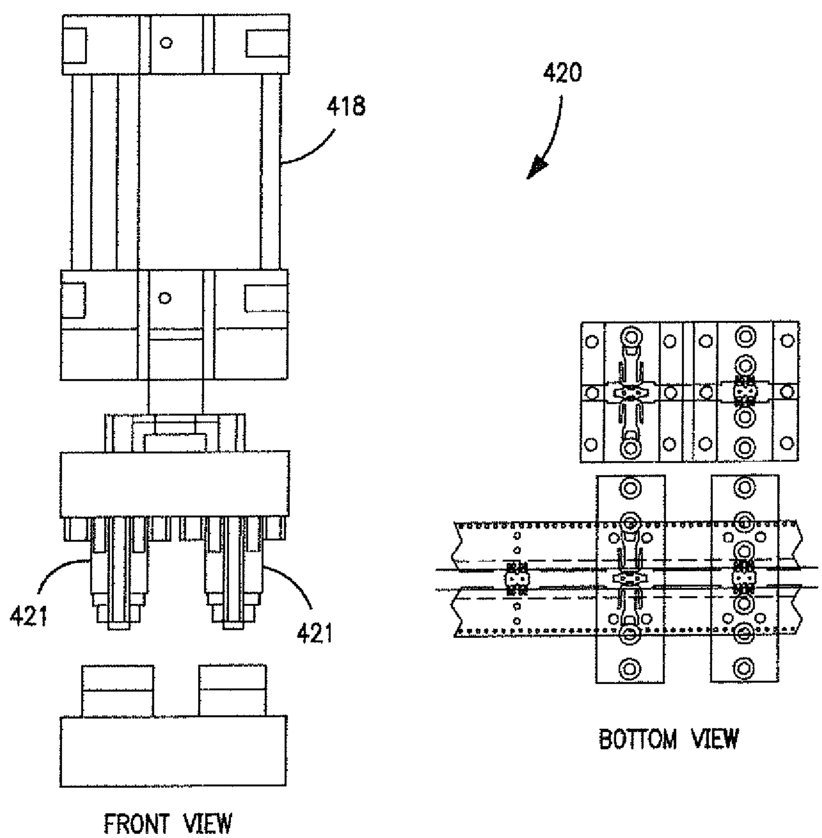


FIG. 4f

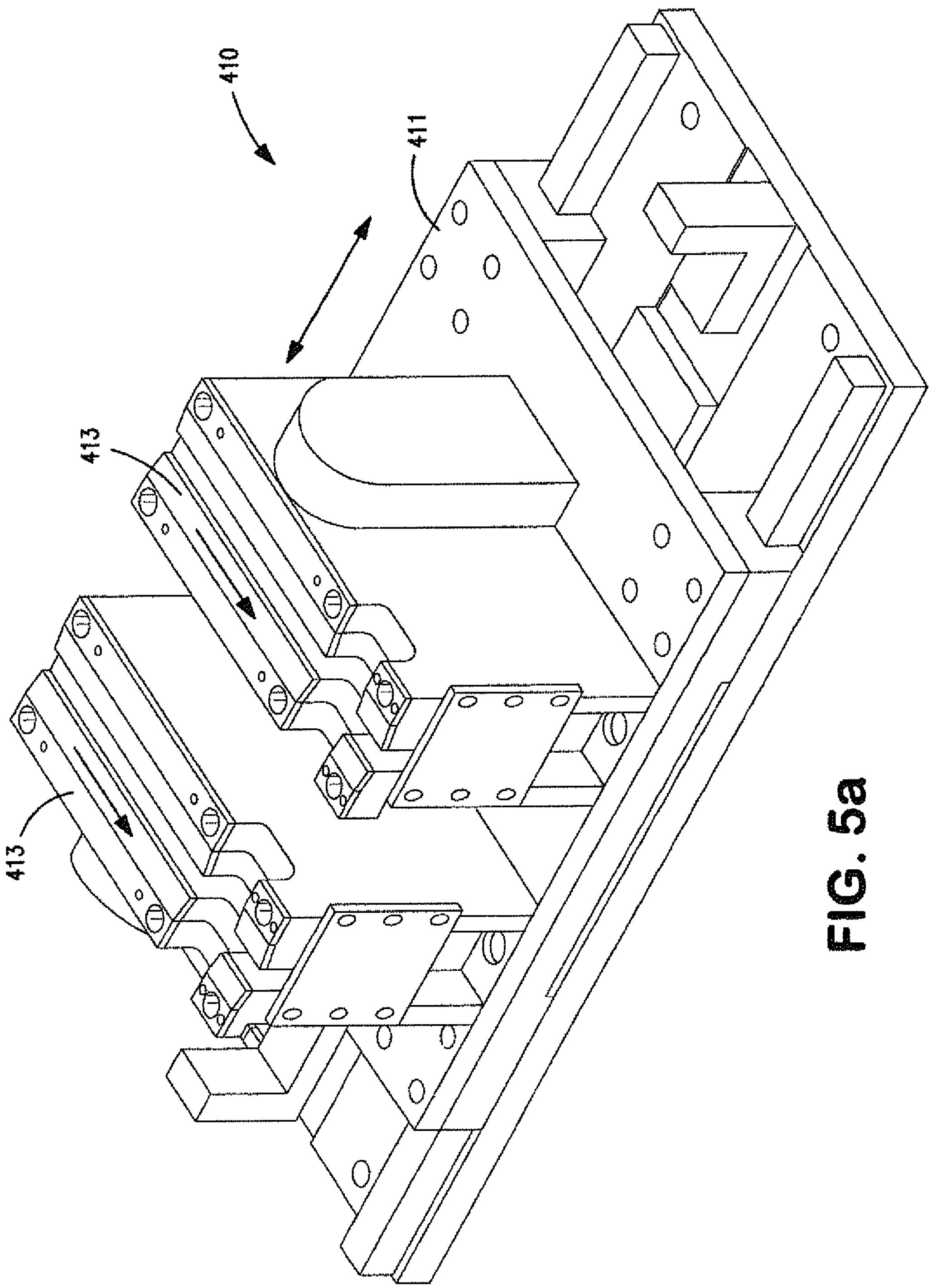
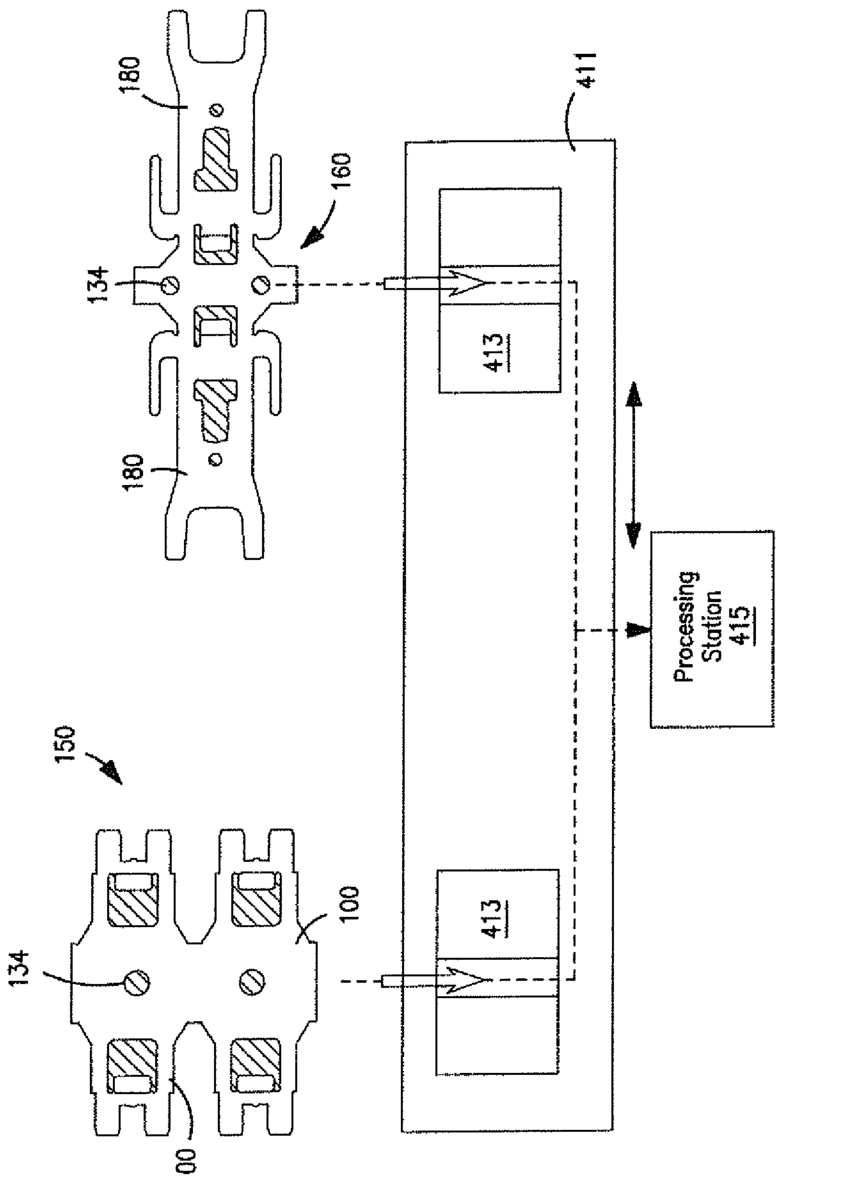


FIG. 5a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134
411
413
180
Processing Station 415
150
134
413
100
100

FIG. 5b

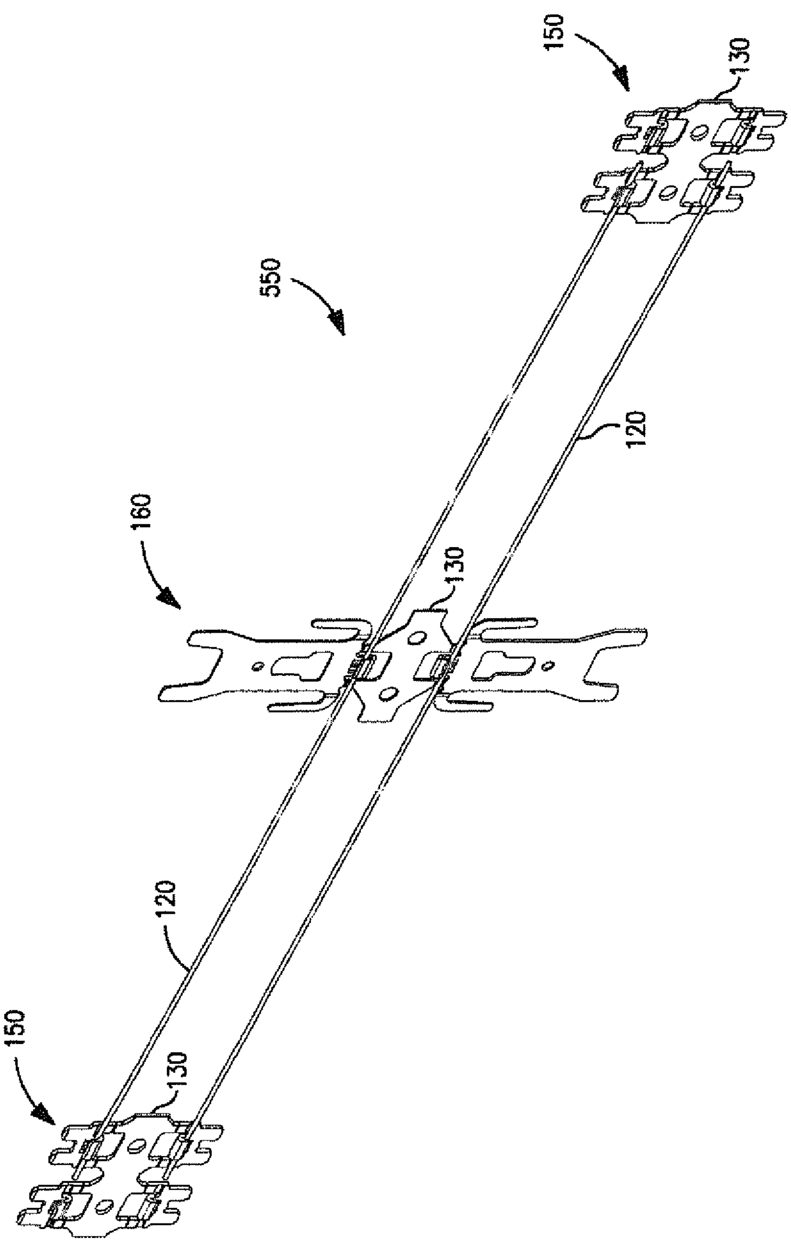

FIG. 5c

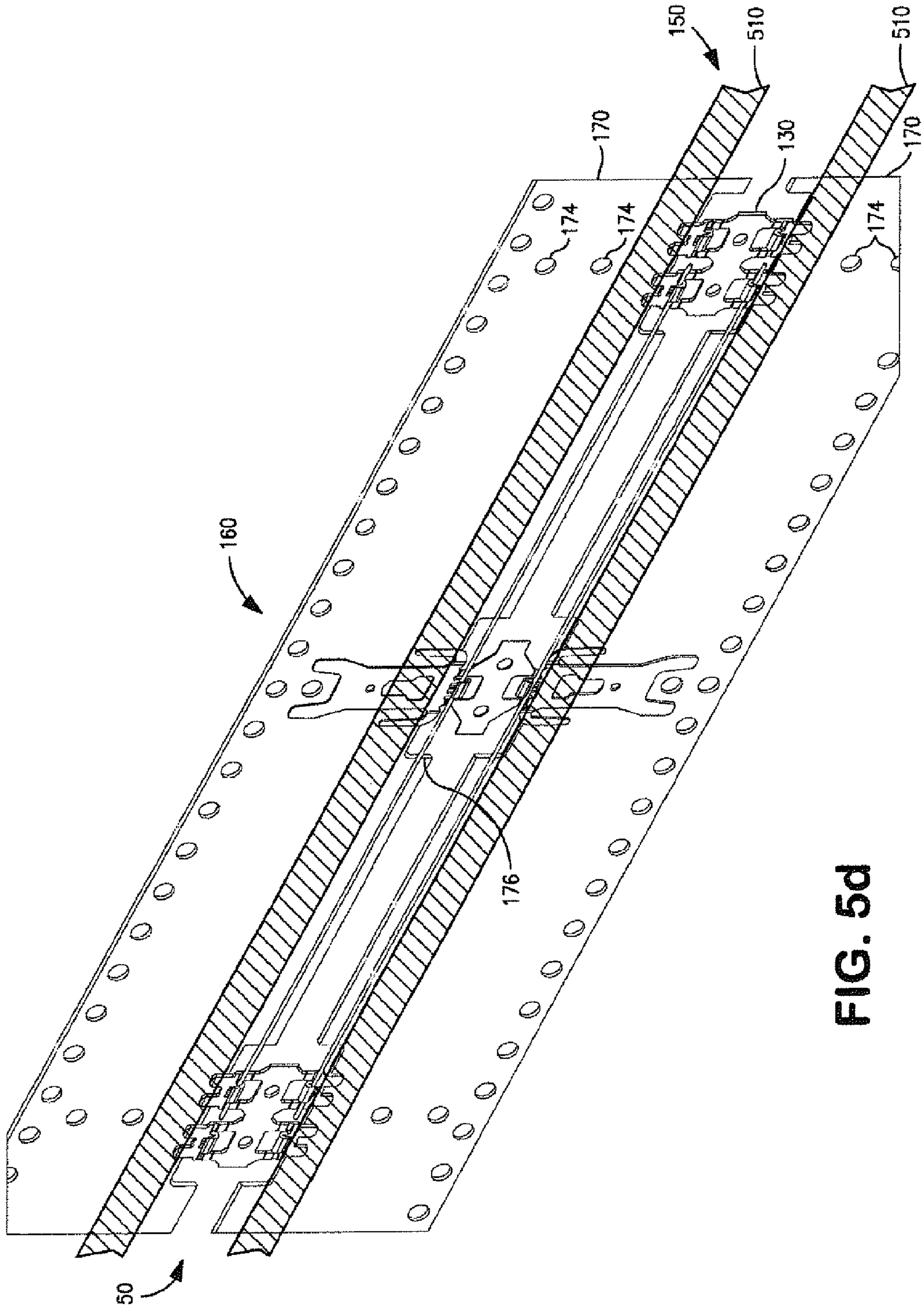

FIG. 5d

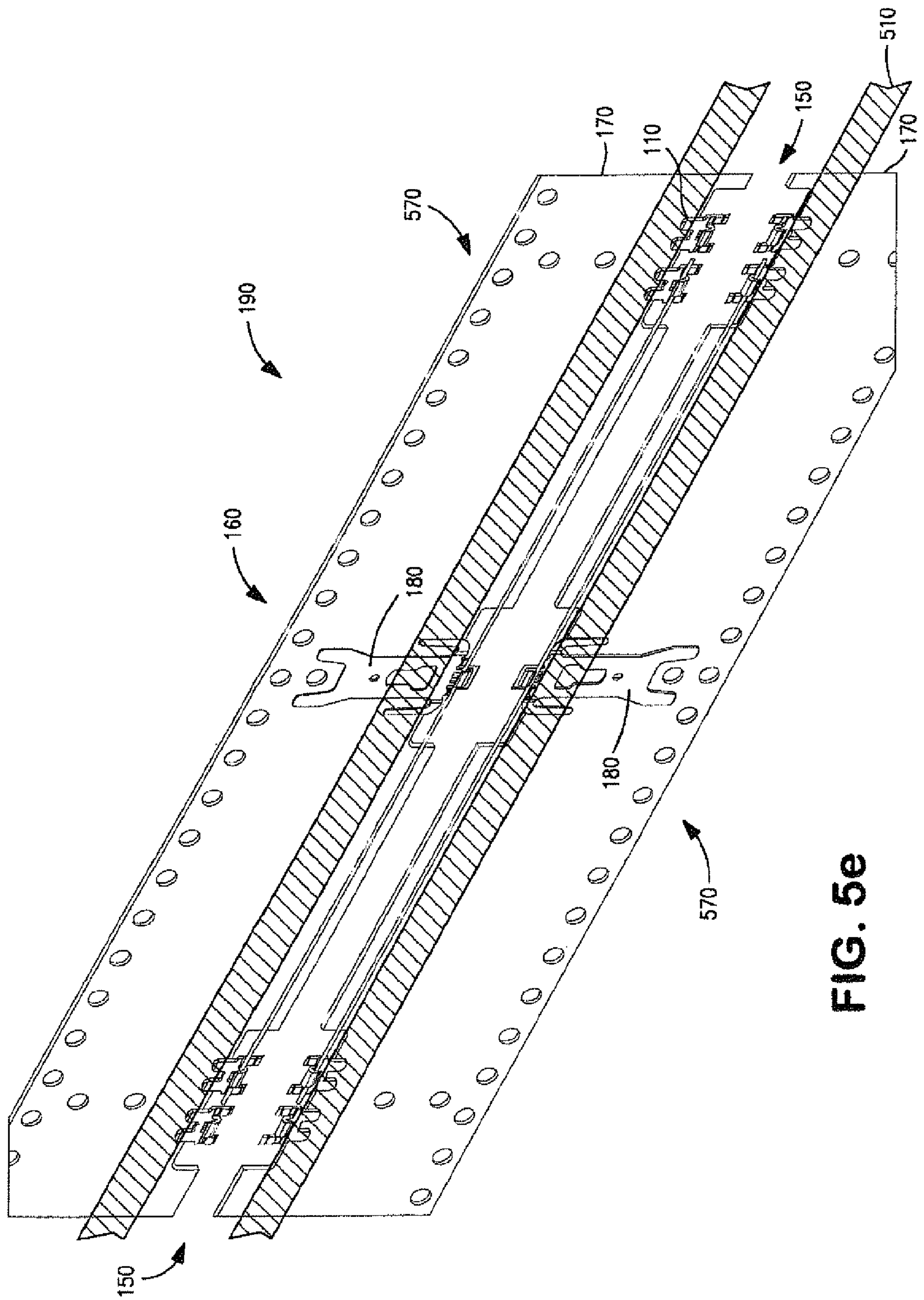

FIG. 5e

APPARATUS AND METHODS FOR FILAMENT CRIMPING AND MANUFACTURING

PRIORITY AND RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a divisional of and claims priority to co-owned and co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/829,208 of the same title filed Jul. 1, 2010, which is a divisional of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/691,562 of the same title filed Jan. 21, 2010, now U.S. Patent No. 7,926, 520, which is a divisional of co-owned U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/473,567 of the same title filed Jun. 22, 2006, now U.S. Pat. No. 7,650,914, each of the foregoing incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to the field of crimping, and in one salient aspect to fine filament crimping of, e.g., shaped memory alloy (SMA) wire.

DESCRIPTION OF RELATED TECHNOLOGY

The crimping of filaments such as metallic wires is well understood. Numerous techniques and configurations for wire and filament crimps are known. See for example, U.S. Pat. No. 5,486,653 to Dohi issued Jan. 23, 1996 entitled "Crimp-style terminal"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,004,171 to Ito, et al. issued Dec. 21, 1999 and entitled "Crimp-type terminal"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,056,605 to Nguyen, et al. issued May 2, 2000 entitled "Contact element with crimp section"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,232,555 to Besler, et al. issued May 15, 2001 entitled "Crimp connection"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,749,457 to Sakaguchi, et al. issued Jun. 15, 2004 entitled "Crimp terminal"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,799,990 to Wendling, et al. issued Oct. 5, 2004 entitled "Crimp connector"; and U.S. Pat. No. 6,893,274 to Chen, et al issued May 17, 2005 and entitled "Structure of ground pin for AC inlet and process for fastening wire onto same".

Similarly, the use of filaments, including those of shaped memory alloy (SMA), for various purposes is also well known. SMA generally comprises a metal that is capable of "remembering" or substantially reassuming a previous geometry. For example, after it is deformed, it can either substantially regain its original geometry by itself during e.g., heating (i.e., the "one-way effect") or, at higher ambient temperatures, simply during unloading (so-called "pseudo-elasticity"). Some examples of shape memory alloys include nickel-titanium ("NiTi" or "Nitinol") alloys and copper-zinc-aluminum alloys.

SMAs often find particular utility in mechanical actuation systems, in that it can be used to replace more costly, heavy, and space-consuming solenoid, motor driven, or relay devices. See for example, U.S. Pat. No. 4,551,974 to Yaeger, et al. issued on Nov. 12, 1985 and entitled "Shape memory effect actuator and methods of assembling and operating therefore"; U.S. Pat. No. 4,806,815 to Honma issued on Feb.

21, 1989 and entitled "Linear motion actuator utilizing extended shape memory alloy member"; U.S. Pat. No. 5,312, 152 to Woebkenberg, Jr., et al. issued on May 17, 1994 and entitled "Shape memory metal actuated separation device"; U.S. Pat. No. 5,440,193 to Barrett issued on Aug. 8, 1995 and entitled "Method and apparatus for structural, actuation and sensing in a desired direction"; U.S. Pat. No. 5,563,466 to Rennex, et al. issued on Oct. 8, 1996 and entitled "Micro-actuator"; U.S. Pat. No. 5,685,148 to Robert issued Nov. 11, 1997 and entitled "Drive apparatus"; U.S. Pat. No. 5,763,979 to Mukherjee, et al. issued on Jun. 9, 1998 and entitled "Actuation system for the control of multiple shape memory alloy elements"; U.S. Pat. No. 5,870,007 to Carr, et al. issued on Feb. 9, 1999 to "Multi-dimensional physical actuation of microstructures"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,236,300 to Minners issued on May 22, 2001 and entitled "Bistable micro-switch and method of manufacturing the same"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,326,707 to Gummin, et al. issued on Dec. 4, 2001 and entitled "Shape memory alloy actuator"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,379,393 to Mavroidis, et al. issued on Apr. 30, 2002 and entitled "Prosthetic, orthotic, and other rehabilitative robotic assistive devices actuated by smart materials"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,425,829 to Julien issued on Jul. 30, 2002 and entitled "Threaded load transferring attachment"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,574,958 to MacGregor issued on Jun. 10, 2003 and entitled "Shape memory alloy actuators and control methods"; U.S. Pat. No. 6,832,477 to Gummin, et al. issued on Dec. 21, 2004 and entitled "Shape memory alloy actuator"; U.S. Patent Publication No. 20020185932 to Gummin, et al. published on Dec. 12, 2002 and entitled "Shape memory alloy actuator"; U.S. Patent Publication No. 20040256920 to Gummin, et al. published on Dec. 23, 2004 entitled "Shape memory alloy actuators"; U.S. Patent Publication No. 20050229670 to Perreault, published on Oct. 20, 2005 and entitled "Stent crimper"; U.S. Patent Publication No. 20050273020 to Whittaker, et al. published on Dec. 8, 2005 and entitled "Vascular guidewire system"; and U.S. Patent Publication No. 20050273059 to Mernoe, et al, published Dec. 8, 2005 and entitled "Disposable, wearable insulin dispensing device".

Deficiencies of the Prior Art

Despite the broad range of crimp technologies and implementations of SMA filaments, there has heretofore been significant difficulty in effectively crimping SMA filament wire when finer wire gauge sizes are chosen. Specifically, prior art approaches to crimping such filaments (including use of serrations or "teeth" in the crimp surfaces) either significantly distort or damage the filament, thereby altering its mechanical characteristics in a deleterious fashion (e.g., reducing its tensile strength or recovery properties), or allowing it to slip or move within the crimp. These problems are often exacerbated by changes in the environment (e.g., temperature, stress, etc.) of the SMA filament and crimp. Other techniques such as brazing, soldering, and the like are also not suitable for such fine-gauge applications.

Furthermore, no suitable solution exists for maintaining a constant and uniform tensile stress on the filament during crimping. Typical SMAs such as Nitinol can recover stress induced strain by up to about eight (8) percent. Therefore, in applications where filament length is relatively small, it is critical to maintain accurate spacing of the end crimping elements connected by the SMA wire after completion of the crimping process.

There is, therefore, a salient unsatisfied need for an improved crimp apparatus and methods of manufacture that specifically accommodate finer gauge SMA filament wire assemblies, especially so as to maintain the desired degree of filament length control post-crimp for, inter alia, length-critical actuator applications.

In addition, improved apparatus and methods for the manufacture and packaging of SMA wire assemblies are also needed in order to maintain these precision assemblies cost-effective and competitive from a manufacturing perspective. Such improved manufacture and packaging approaches would also ideally be compatible with extant industry-standard equipment and techniques to the maximum degree practicable, thereby minimizing the degree of infrastructure and equipment alterations and upgrades necessary to implement the technology.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The invention satisfies the aforementioned needs by providing an improved crimp apparatus and methods that are particularly useful with smaller gauge filaments (e.g., SMA wire). In addition, machines and methods for the automated manufacture of such assemblies are also disclosed.

In a first aspect of the invention, a filament crimping element is disclosed. In one embodiment, the element comprises: a first plurality of cavities, the first set of cavities disposed at a spacing which creates a first plurality of features; and a second plurality of cavities, the second set of cavities disposed at a spacing which creates a second plurality of features; wherein the first and second pluralities of cavities are substantially opposite one another when the crimping element is crimped, the first plurality of features adapted to be placed at least partially within the second plurality of cavities and the second plurality of features adapted to be placed at least partially within the first plurality of cavities. In one variant, the first and second pluralities of cavities and features form a substantially serpentine channel therebetween for the filament when the crimping element is crimped. In another variant, at least one of each of the first and second pluralities of features comprises substantially rounded edges, the substantially rounded edges mitigating deformation of at least a portion of the filament during crimping.

In still another variant, the crimping element is formed from a material which has a hardness less than that of the filament, the lesser hardness of the material at least mitigating deformation of the filament by the crimping element during crimping.

In another embodiment, the filament crimping element comprises: a first plurality of cavities, the first plurality of cavities disposed at a spacing which creates a first plurality of features; and a second plurality of cavities, the second plurality of cavities disposed at a spacing which creates a second plurality of features. The first and second pluralities of cavities are substantially opposite to yet substantially offset from one another when the crimping element is crimped; and the first and second pluralities of cavities and features form a substantially serpentine channel therebetween for receiving the filament when the crimping element is crimped.

In yet another embodiment, the filament crimping element comprises: a first substantially planar portion having a first face; a second substantially planar portion having a second face; a fold region coupling the first and second substantially planar portions, the fold region being adapted to allow the first and second faces to be disposed substantially opposite one another during a crimping operation; at least one first raised feature disposed substantially on the first face; and at least one second raised feature disposed substantially on the second face. The at least one first and second features are substantially opposite to yet substantially offset from one another when the crimping element is crimped.

In a second aspect of the invention, apparatus for the automated manufacture of filament crimp apparatus is disclosed. In one embodiment, the apparatus for automated manufacture comprises: apparatus configured to present a plurality of crimping elements; a tensioning station, the tensioning station adapted to keep a filament wire under a tension during at least a portion of a crimping process; and a crimping apparatus, the crimping apparatus adapted to crimp at least one of the crimping elements to the filament wire under tension to produce one or more of the filament crimp apparatus.

In one variant, the apparatus configured to present comprises a de-reeling station, the de-reeling station comprising a plurality of crimp element carrier assemblies.

In another variant, the crimping elements are each joined together to at least one other crimping element, and the apparatus further comprises a singulation station, the singulation station adapted to singulate the crimp elements from one another.

In a third aspect of the invention, a crimped filament assembly is disclosed. In one embodiment, the assembly comprises: at least one crimp element assembly, the at least one element assembly comprising: a plurality of crimp heads, each of the crimp heads comprising a metal alloy with a plurality of crimping cavities therein, the plurality of crimping cavities adapted to retain a filament wire therein; and a filament wire, the filament wire crimped to at least two of the crimp heads; and a carrier; the carrier adapted to locate the at least one crimp element assembly.

In a fourth aspect of the invention, a method for manufacturing a crimp element carrier assembly is disclosed. In one embodiment, the method comprises: providing a plurality of crimp elements; disposing a filament wire proximate at least one of the plurality of crimp elements; crimping the filament wire under tension to the at least one of the plurality of crimp elements to form a crimped assembly; and placing the crimped assembly onto a carrier.

In a fifth aspect of the invention, a method of crimping a fine-gauge filament is disclosed. In one embodiment, the method comprises: providing a filament; providing a crimp element having substantially offsetting features; and deforming the filament into a substantially serpentine shape within the substantially offsetting features of the crimp element.

In a sixth aspect of the invention, a method for manufacturing crimp element assemblies is disclosed. In one embodiment, the method comprises: providing a plurality of crimp elements; disposing a filament wire proximate at least two of the plurality of crimp elements; crimping the filament wire to the at least two of the plurality of crimp elements; and severing the filament between the at least two crimp elements so as to form at least two crimp element assemblies.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The features, objectives, and advantages of the invention will become more apparent from the detailed description set forth below when taken in conjunction with the drawings, wherein:

FIG. **1** is a perspective view of a first exemplary embodiment illustrating a folded (end) crimp element according to the principles of the present invention.

FIG. **1***a* is a perspective view showing an unfolded crimp element of FIG. **1**.

FIG. **1***b* is a cross-sectional perspective view of a folded crimp element of FIG. **1** prior to being fully crimped, taken along line **1***b*-**1***b*.

FIG. **1***c* is a cross-sectional perspective view of a fully crimped end crimp element of FIG. **1**, taken along line **1***b*-**1***b*.

FIG. **1***d* is a top view showing the cross-section of FIG. **1***c*.

FIG. **1***e* is a perspective view showing a plurality of the end crimp elements joined to a carrier.

FIG. **1***f* is a perspective view showing a plurality of a central crimp elements joined to a carrier.

FIG. **1***g* is a perspective view showing the assembly embodiment of FIGS. **1***e* and **1***f* mounted on a polymer carrier adapted for automatic manufacturing processes.

FIG. **1***h* is a sectional view of another embodiment of the crimp element of the invention, wherein an offset (Q) is maintained between opposing crimp features.

FIG. **2** is a perspective view of another exemplary embodiment of the head portion of the crimp element according to the principles of the present invention.

FIG. **2***a* is a top view showing the exemplary embodiment of the crimp element of FIG. **2** as fully crimped.

FIG. **2***b* is a combination perspective and sectional view of another embodiment of the crimp element of the invention, shown prior to and after crimping, respectively.

FIG. **3** is a logical flow diagram illustrating one exemplary embodiment of the method of manufacturing the end crimping element carrier assembly of FIG. **1***g*.

FIG. **4** is a front view of an exemplary embodiment of automated manufacture equipment adapted to manufacture the crimp element carrier assembly of FIG. **1***g*.

FIG. **4***a* is a front detail view of an exemplary embodiment of the de-reeling station of the automated manufacture equipment of FIG. **4**.

FIG. **4***b* is a front detail view of exemplary embodiments of the crimping and singulating stations of the automated manufacture equipment of FIG. **4**.

FIG. **4***c* is a front detail view of an exemplary embodiment of the carrier stamping station of the automated manufacture equipment of FIG. **4**.

FIG. **4***d* is a front and right side detail view of an exemplary embodiment of the singulation station of the automated manufacture equipment of FIG. **4**.

FIG. **4***e* is a front, bottom and top detail view of an exemplary embodiment of the carrier tape punching station that provides indexing holes and slots to the carrier tape.

FIG. **4***f* is a front and bottom detail view of an exemplary embodiment of the singulation station which singulates the two carrier tape assemblies into two (2) single (parallel) carrier assemblies.

FIG. **5***a* is a perspective view of one exemplary embodiment of the sliding station of the automated manufacture equipment of FIG. **4**.

FIG. **5***b* is an elevational view demonstrating the operation of the sliding station of the automated manufacture equipment of FIGS. **4** and **5***a*.

FIG. **5***c* is a perspective view of a final product assembly manufactured using the automated manufacture equipment of FIG. **4**.

FIG. **5***d* is a perspective view of the final product assembly placed on a carrier tape manufactured using the automated manufacture equipment of FIG. **4**.

FIG. **5***e* is a perspective view of the final product assembly shown in FIG. **5***d*, after the assembly has been singulated using the automated manufacture equipment of FIG. **4**.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Reference is now made to the drawings wherein like numerals refer to like parts throughout.

As used herein, the term "shape memory alloy" or "SMA" shall be understood to include, but not be limited to, any metal that is capable of "remembering" or substantially reassuming a previous geometry. For example, after it is deformed, it can either substantially regain its original geometry by itself during e.g., heating (i.e., the "one-way effect") or, at higher ambient temperatures, simply during unloading (so-called "pseudo-elasticity"). Some examples of shape memory alloys include nickel-titanium ("NiTi" or "Nitinol") alloys and copper-zinc-aluminum alloys.

As used herein, the term "filament" refers to any substantially elongate body, form, strand, or collection of the foregoing, including without limitation drawn, extruded or stranded wires or fibers, whether metallic or otherwise.

As used herein, the term "progressive stamping" shall be understood to include any metalworking method including, without limitation, punching, coining, bending or any other method of modifying or otherwise changing metal raw material. Such stamping may be combined with an automatic feeding system.

As used herein, the term "controller" refers to, without limitation, any hardware, software, and or firmware implementation of control logic, algorithm, or apparatus adapted to control the operation of one or more component of a machine or device, or step(s) of a method.

As used herein, the term "computer program" is meant to include any sequence or human or machine cognizable steps which perform a function. Such program may be rendered in virtually any programming language or environment including, for example, C/C++, Fortran, COBOL, PASCAL, assembly language, markup languages (e.g., HTML, SGML, XML, VoXML), and the like, as well as object-oriented environments such as the Common Object Request Broker Architecture (CORBA), Java™ (including J2ME, Java Beans, etc.) and the like.

As used herein, the terms "processor" and "microcontroller" are meant to include any integrated circuit or other electronic device (or collection of devices) capable of performing an operation on at least one instruction including, without limitation, reduced instruction set core (RISC) processors, CISC microprocessors, microcontroller units (MCUs), CISC-based central processing units (CPUs), and digital signal processors (DSPs). The hardware of such devices may be integrated onto a single substrate (e.g., silicon "die"), or distributed among two or more substrates. Furthermore, various functional aspects of the processor may be implemented solely as software or firmware associated with the processor.

Overview

In one salient aspect, the present invention discloses improved crimp apparatus and methods useful in variety of applications including, inter alia, crimping fine-gauge SMA (e.g., Nitinol) wire. This apparatus provides a cost-effective, easy to use, and effective way of fastening such fine-gauge wires so that desired strength and other mechanical properties (including maintaining precise length relationships after crimping) are preserved. These properties can be critical to precision applications of such crimped fine-gauge wire, such as in medical device actuators.

Key to maintaining these properties is the use of a novel crimp geometry, which in effect "kinks" the filament without any significant intrusion or filament over-compression, thereby locking the filament in place with respect to the crimp.

The material chosen for the crimp element of one exemplary embodiment is also softer than that of the filament being crimped (e.g., SMA), thereby mitigating or eliminating any damage to the filament which would otherwise reduce its strength (and the strength of the crimp as a whole).

The foregoing features (i.e., choice of material hardness and properties, and filament geometry or "kink") also cooperate in a synergistic fashion to make the crimp stronger and more reliable than prior art approaches.

In one embodiment, a desired level of tension is maintained on the filament during the crimp process, which helps preserve the desired length relationships of the SMA filament post-crimping.

In another aspect of the invention, improved apparatus for processing the aforementioned crimp apparatus, in order to manufacture precision crimp and wire assemblies, is disclosed. In one variant, the apparatus comprises a substantially automated machine having a plurality of functional modules or stations therein. Crimp element assemblies are fed into the machine, which automatically aligns these assemblies, places the filament within the crimp heads of the crimp elements, and then crimps the filaments under tension to produce final assemblies which have the aforementioned desirable mechanical properties.

Methods of manufacturing including those using the aforementioned apparatus are also described in detail.

Filament Crimping Apparatus

Referring now to FIGS. **1** through **2***a*, various embodiments of the crimp apparatus according to the present invention are described in detail. It will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill when provided this disclosure that still other variants and configurations of crimp apparatus may be utilized consistent with the invention, and hence the present disclosure and the claims appended hereto are in no way limited to the illustrated and described embodiments.

FIG. **1** shows a first embodiment of an "end" crimp element **100**, having a pre-formed head crimp element **110**. As used herein, the term "end" is merely intended in a relative sense, in that one embodiment of the invention (see FIG. **1***g*) places two of these elements **100** at respective ends of a larger assembly **150**. The end elements **100** disclosed herein can therefore be disposed at literally any location within an assembly, or even be used alone.

The end crimp element **100** of the illustrated embodiment generally comprises a metal alloy having a plurality of arm elements **102**, leg elements **106**, and a head element **110**. The metal alloy of the element **100** itself comprises a copper based alloy (such as, C26000 70/30 "cartridge brass", or UNS C51000), post plated with a tin-lead ("Sn—Pb") overplate, although any number of conventional material and plating choices could be substituted consistent with the principles of the present invention. While the present invention is generally contemplated for use with shape memory alloy (SMA) filaments, other fine gauge filament wires or elongate structures could also be used consistent with the principles of the present invention.

As previously noted, the use of a material that is softer than the filament being crimped (e.g., SMA) also advantageously avoids damage to the fine-gauge filament, thereby enhancing the strength of the filament and the crimp as a whole (as compared to prior art techniques which substantially cut into or deform the filament).

In a related fashion, the proper selection of materials and the design of the crimp head (described below) further avoid any significant deformation of the filament (e.g., reduction in its thickness/diameter, or alteration of its cross-sectional shape) that could also weaken the strength of the filament and the crimp as a whole.

It will be recognized that the terms "arm", "leg" and "head" as used herein are merely a convenient reference (in effect anthropomorphizing the element **100**), and hence no particular orientation or placement of the element **100** or the individual components **102**, **110**, **106** is required to practice the invention. For example, as shown in FIG. **1***g*, the elements **100** may be placed in mirror-image disposition to one another, may be laid flat, used inverted, etc.

The exemplary end crimp element **100** of FIG. **1** is manufactured using a flat stock (e.g. 0.3 mm) that is stamped using standard manufacturing processes, such as e.g. progressive stamping or even hand stamping using a pneumatic press. The stamping should preferably be performed from the front side to the back (the front side being the near side of the device shown in FIG. **1**) so as to minimize the chance that burrs, etc. could cause damage to the resultantly placed filament wire **120** (FIG. **1***g*). Although stamping is considered exemplary due to considerations such as cost and dimensional accuracy in high volume production runs, other manufacturing methods such as e.g., photochemical machining or even laser/ion beam cutting techniques could be utilized as well consistent with the principles of the present invention. The use of photochemical machining is advantageous in smaller run quantities as initial investment costs to produce the tools necessary to create the desired geometries are minimal. The manufacture of precision metal parts is well understood in the mechanical arts, and as such will not be discussed further herein.

Referring again to FIG. **1**, the "arm" elements **102** generally comprise a minimum width of approximately twice (2×) the base material thickness, although other shapes and thicknesses can be chosen depending on the particular application. A cavity or channel **104** is formed via either the aforementioned stamping, photochemical machining, or other processes which provides clearance for the crimped filament (not shown). For example, if the filament comprises an SMA, then providing clearance outside of the crimp location permits the free movement of the SMA filament without any resultant friction associated with a tangential surface of the filament coming into contact with a respective face of the end crimp element **100**. It also allows the wire to be straight and maintain its active length, and also maintain a desired electrical resistance value. Such a gap **104** can generally improve SMA actuator efficiency.

Also, it will be noted that the end crimp element **100** of FIG. **1** comprises two (2) arm elements **102**. In the present embodiment, two arms **102** are included for purposes of symmetry, and so that the single end crimping element **100** could be utilized in either left-handed or right-handed applications. Any number of different configurations of the arm elements **102** (including none, a single arm, or even more then two aims) could be utilized consistent with the principles of the present invention. Optional chamferring **103** is included to reduce the likelihood that a sharp edge could result in cuts to either an individual utilizing the present invention or alternatively, any other proximate electrical or mechanical components. Furthermore, other surfaces than those shown in FIG. **1** may be chamfered or otherwise processed (e.g., mechanically polished, de-burred, etc.) in order to achieve these goals.

The "leg" elements **106** of the end element **100** generally comprise a post with chamfered lead features **108**. The legs **106** are characterized by their length "a" which is the insertion depth of the feature into a respective receptacle (not shown) or via a through-hole mounting. Although depicted in an arrangement for use as a plug or through-hole mounted device, the legs **106** of the device **100** could easily be altered for other configurations such as e.g. surface-mounting or self-leading. The use of surface mounted leads is well known in the electronic arts, and can be readily implemented with the present invention by those of ordinary skill given the present disclosure.

Referring now to FIG. **1***a*, an unfolded representation (i.e., a version where the head element **110** has not been yet folded) of the end crimp element **100** of FIG. **1** is disclosed and shown. Of particular interest are the various features of the head element **110**. Specifically, head element **110** contains a plurality of cavities **112***a* and the resultant ribs **112***b* formed by the creation of such cavities. These features **112***a*, **112***b* are advantageously formed using a conventional high-speed stamping process, although other methods, such as e.g., pneumatic or hand-operated press, or the aforementioned photo-chemical machining processes, could be used. In the embodiment shown in FIG. **1***a*, the head element comprises five (5) cavities **112***a* and three (3) ribs **112***b*, although more or less cavities **112***a* and ribs **112***b* could be utilized depending on design constraints or desired attributes such as e.g. filament retention strength, width of the head element **110**, etc. The aforementioned five-cavity design has been shown during testing by the Assignee hereof to work well with wire filament sizes down to approximately 0.002 inches (0.05 mm) with a material thickness of about 0.012 inches (0.3 mm).

Cavity pitch dimension ("p") and cavity width ("w") can also be important considerations when designing the end crimp element **100**. Dimensions "p" and "w" should be adjusted so that when crimped (as shown in FIG. **1**), the filament does not become over-compressed during the crimping process, thereby resulting in a broken or damaged filament.

As shown in FIG. **1***a*, the exemplary configuration of the crimp element **100** also includes a substantial planar (when unfolded, as shown), solid region **105** between the cavities **122** and the head element **110** that is used to receive the bend or fold of the element **100** when the filament is crimped. This region **105** is aligned with the other features of the element **100** (cavities **112***s*, ribs **112***b*, and channels **104**) so that the filament is properly placed and vertically aligned with respect to these elements (and the bend) when the element **100** is crimped.

The exemplary embodiment of the crimp element also optionally includes one or more substantially planar (e.g., flat) surfaces disposed somewhere on the body, arms, legs, etc. in order to facilitate pickup by a vacuum pick-and-place or other comparable apparatus. For example, in the embodiment of FIG. **1***a*, the planar areas disposed proximate the channel **104** on the arms **102** can each be used for this purpose, although it will be appreciated that such area(s) may be placed literally on any surface of the element **100**.

Referring now to FIG. **1***b*, a cross-sectional view of the first embodiment of the crimp element **100** described in FIG. **1** is provided, showing a filament **120** proximate the crimping cavities **112***a*, **112***b* after the crimp has been pre-formed and just prior to being fully crimped. Of particular interest are inner and outer cavity dimensions, "d" and "w", respectively, where the pitch "p" is characterized by the equation "p=d+w". As can be seen in FIG. **1***c*, when fully crimped, the filament fits substantially "kinked" or deformed into the serpentine-shaped cavity created by features **112***a* and **112***b*, so that the filament **120** does not become over-compressed, yet becomes firmly secured within the crimped head element **110**. The filament **120** thereby becomes essentially fixed in the end crimp element **100** without having to compromise the integrity of the filament **120** due to over-compression of the filament wire **120** (e.g., without substantially deforming the filament **120**).

As used herein, the term "serpentine" broadly refers to, without limitation, any alternating, wave (sinusoidal, square, triangular, or otherwise), or displaced shapes or form part of or formed within a component such as a filament. Such alternating features, shapes or displacements may be, e.g., in one dimension, or two or more dimensions, relative to a generally longitudinal dimension of the filament. Furthermore, such features, shapes or displacements may be substantially regular or irregular.

It will be recognized that the cavities **112***a* and ribs **112***b* of the exemplary embodiment also purposely do not project along their longitudinal axis into the bend or fold region **105** of the **110** element; this acts to increase the strength of the fold when ultimately crimped.

As shown best in FIGS. **1***a* and **1***d*, the edges of the ribs and cavities of the exemplary embodiment are also radiused or rounded, so as to avoid sharp edges which might unduly cut or penetrate the filament being crimped, thereby strengthening the crimp as a whole.

FIG. **1***d* shows a top view of the cross-section of FIG. **1***c*.

In one variant shown in FIG. **1***e*, the crimp elements **100** can be mounted on a carrier **130** to facilitate automated processing and/or allow for improved handling during subsequent manufacturing/processing steps. Such a configuration is particularly advantageous when used in progressive stamping equipment. While the assembly **150** of FIG. **1***e* is shown with four (4) end devices **100** attached to the carrier **130**, any number of devices **100** could be added or extended to the assembly **150** in various configurations so that any number (e.g. 6, 8, 10 . . .) of devices **100** could be utilized on a single carrier **130**. Furthermore, while the assembly **150** of FIG. **1***e* shows a substantially symmetrical and mirror-image configuration comprising pairs of end elements **100**, such symmetry is not required to practice the invention. For example, the assembly **150** might comprise a single row of commonly oriented elements **100** (i.e., the assembly of FIG. **1***e* effectively cut in half), or a single row of alternating (front/back) elements. Myriad such variations and alterations are contemplated by the present invention.

In another useful embodiment, the carrier **130** may comprise a continuous reel, so that the devices **100** and carrier **130** can be spooled onto a reel for continuous processing. A continuous reel configuration lends itself to efficient manufacturing techniques such as e.g. progressive crimping of the filament wire **120** to the end crimp element **100** such as through the use of the exemplary automated manufacture equipment **400** discussed with respect to FIGS. **4**-**4***c* subsequently herein.

Referring again to FIG. **1***e*, the carrier **130** comprises a plurality of holes **134** that can be used for inter alia, feeding purposes. These holes **134** will ideally be located at a common spacing (e.g. 4 mm) to facilitate machine feeding, although sizing and placement of the holes **134** may also be configured for other purposes; e.g., so that the carrier may be utilized on standardized processing equipment. While shown as a single hole **134** per end device **100** pair, any alternative feeding scheme can be utilized consistent with the principles of the present invention. In addition, optional singulation score lines **132** or other comparable mechanisms can be utilized to facilitate the separation of the devices **100** from the carrier **130**.

FIG. **1***f* shows a crimp assembly **160** having a plurality (2) of central crimp elements **180**. These central crimp elements **180** comprise a complement to the end crimp elements **100** shown in FIGS. **1**-**1***d*, as discussed subsequently herein with respect to FIG. **1***g*. Although different geometrically, the principles of construction and operation of the central crimp elements **180** (especially the head region **182**) are consistent with the end devices **100** previously described.

The term "central" as used with respect to the crimp elements **180** is also merely used for reference in the illustrated embodiment; these crimp elements **180** accordingly may be used in embodiments where they are not central (e.g., they may comprise "ends"), and also may be stationary or movable with respect to the other elements of the assembly. They may also comprise a geometry and/or crimp type that is different in configuration than that shown and that of the end elements **100**. The "central" elements **180** may also comprise part of a larger, fixed assembly or device, and may be attached thereto or integral therewith. They also need not necessarily be used with or contain their own crimp.

Note that the carrier **130** shown in the embodiment of FIG. **1***f* comprises two (2) holes **134** per device **180** pair. The device **180** shown in FIG. **1***f* is also larger in scale than the device **100** shown in FIG. **1***e*. These central crimp devices **180** can, in one application, be used in the same assembly **190** as the end elements **100** (shown in FIG. **1***g*) and hence the feed or indexing spacing (i.e., the spacing between adjacent holes **134**) has been advantageously chosen to be the same for both the embodiment of FIG. **1***f* and the embodiment of FIG. **1***e*, thereby maintaining a consistent spacing across both assemblies **160**, **150**.

Referring now to FIG. **1***g*, an exemplary embodiment of a carrier assembly **190** utilizing the assemblies **150**, **160** of FIG. **1***e* and FIG. **1***f*, respectively, is shown. The assembly **190** of FIG. **1***g* comprises two polymer carriers **170** fabricated from a material such as e.g. polyvinyl chloride or "PVC", although other materials including for example polyethylene can be used. The two assemblies **150**, **160** and two filament wires **120***a*, **120***b* are disposed on the carrier strips **170** utilizing an adhesive on the carrier strip, or tape covering the assemblies (not shown), or both. Ideally such adhesive or tape does not leave any residue on the filament or crimp elements (that might interfere with contact resistance or other properties); one embodiment of the invention accomplishes this result by using a low-transfer white tape (such as, for example, #4236—General Purpose Tensilized Polypropylene TearStrip tape manufactured by Tesa Tape Inc. of Charlotte, N.C., although other tapes with other properties may be substituted). The exemplary tape has no fibers in the paper used to form the tape, although use of such tape is not a requirement for practicing the invention. While only shown in part in FIG. **1***g*, the carrier assembly **190** is intended to be placed on a continuous reel comprising a plurality of the aforementioned assemblies of FIGS. **1***e* and **1***f*, e.g., industry-standard automated processing reels, or any other equivalent device. Custom or proprietary carrier reels can be utilized as well, if desired.

The aforementioned tape can also comprise notches or apertures formed therein and placed coincident with the substantially planar surfaces of the crimp elements **100**, **180** so as to allow the pickup and placement of the assemblies while still attached to the carrier.

The carriers **170**, as previously mentioned, ideally comprise a sufficiently flexible and low-cost (yet mechanically robust) polymer material such as polyvinyl chloride ("PVC") having a plurality of reel feed holes **172** and assembly holes **174**. The reel holes **172** are used for, inter cilia, feeding the reel through an automated machine, and may be placed at industry standard, e.g. EIA, spacing if desired so that the resultant reel and end crimping element carrier may be utilized on existing placement equipment. In addition, the carriers **170** also comprises a plurality of clearance slots **176**. These slots allow removal of part from carrier (i.e., provide sufficient clearance). It will be appreciated that based on the particular needs of a given application, any of the feed or assembly holes previously described **134**, **172**, **174** can conceivably be used for indexing and/or establishing proper assembly length, such uses being readily implemented by those of ordinary skill provided the present disclosure.

In the illustrated embodiment, each carrier strip **170** has associated with it: (i) two end crimp elements **100** of the type shown in FIG. **1***e*, (ii) one center crimp element **180** as shown in FIG. **1***f*, and (iii) a filament wire **120** that joins the aforementioned crimp elements **100**, **180** together into a single assembly. The filament wire **120** of the illustrated embodiment comprises a shape memory alloy ("SMA"), such as Nitinol wire. Herein lies a salient advantage of this embodiment of the present invention; i.e., the ability to securely crimp Nitinol wire without reducing its strength, yet at a very low cost. This capability stems largely from the particular configuration of the crimp heads **110**, **182** of the crimp elements **100**, **180**.

Variations in the geometry, materials etc. of the assembly **190** of FIG. **1***g*, and combinations thereof, will be readily apparent to one of ordinary skill given the present disclosure.

It will also be recognized that while the illustrated embodiments of the crimp elements **100**, **180** of the invention utilize a shape having "arms", "legs", and/or a "body", other embodiments of these elements (not shown) do not include such components, but rather merely a crimp head **110** and cavities **112** and ribs **112***b*. Stated differently, the crimp elements **100**, **180** may comprise only the components absolutely necessary to form the crimp of one or more filaments. This configuration may be used, inter alia, for crimping the ends of two filaments together.

Moreover, it will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill that the exemplary configurations of the crimp elements (and carrier strip approach of FIG. **1***g*) advantageously minimize the use of stamped material needed to form the carrier assembly **190** of FIG. **1***g*. Specifically, by using a hole spacing (described previously herein with respect to FIG. **1***e*) that precisely places the individual crimp elements with respect to the processing machinery, no metallic carriers or lead frames (such as those formed within the stamped material used to form the crimp elements themselves) are needed, thereby significantly reducing cost.

In another embodiment of the crimp element, the cavities and ribs **112***a*, **112***b* are replaced with ribs or features that are merely raised above a substantially planar surface or face of the crimping element (as opposed to having cavities form at least one set of the features as in the embodiment of FIG. **1***a*). Accordingly, the crimp element under such a configuration might comprise a flat piece of metal or alloy that simply has two (or two sets) of raised opposed features or ribs that substantially interlock with one another; see for example the embodiment of FIG. **2***b* described subsequently herein.

In still another embodiment (FIG. **1***h*), the crimp element cavity and rib dimensions relative to the filament dimensions can be altered to cause deflection of the filament into a serpentine or modulated shape without the crimping ribs and cavities **112***a*, **112***b* interacting with one another. Specifically, the plane formed by the top surfaces or edges of one set of ribs or features does not intersect the plan formed by the top surfaces or edges of the opposing set of ribs or features, thereby maintaining an offset (Q) yet still causing significant deflection of the filament to resist extraction thereof from the crimp.

Referring now to FIG. **2**, yet another embodiment of a crimp element according to the invention is disclosed. As shown in FIG. **2**, this alternate crimp element **200** generally comprises a metal alloy having a plurality of pre-formed arms **202**, a plurality of stationary arms **204**, an interconnecting base **206**, and a leg region **208**. The space or gap formed between juxtaposed ones of the pre-formed **202** and stationary (unformed) arms **204** (see FIG. **2***a*) is adapted for the placement of a thin filament **120** such as the aforementioned exemplary Nitinol SMA wire. Features such as e.g. exemplary chamfers **210** shown on the arms **202**, **204** and leg **208** reduce the number of sharp edges on the device **200**, minimizing the risk of cuts or other deleterious effects when handling these devices. The embodiment of FIG. **2** can have advantages in that the wire need not be "placed" per se, but allows the wire rather to be placed generally between the arms **202**, **204** once as shown, and then requires no subsequent movement out of its axial position.

FIG. **2***a* shows a top view of the crimp element **200** of FIG. **2**, after crimping has been conducted. Of particular interest is the unique feature of the device **200** that allow the wire **120** to be crimped without damaging the wire **120** itself. Note gap dimension "g" between the pre-formed **202** and stationary arms **204**. This gap "g" prevents the filament **120** from being over-compressed or otherwise damaged during crimping, while allowing the filament to remain securely crimped to the device **200**.

The embodiment of FIGS. **2**-**2***a* can be used with either of the end or central crimp elements **100**, **180** previously described herein (e.g., as a replacement for the heads **110**, **182**, or in tandem therewith), or with still other configurations.

FIG. **2***b* illustrates yet another embodiment of the crimp element of the invention. In this embodiment, the crimp element **250** comprises a substantially planar element **252** with first and second crimp regions **254**, **256**, each having a set of raised crimp features **258**. These crimp features are offset from one another and are designed to substantially interlock, yet with enough distal and lateral spacing so that the filament **262** is deformed into the desired serpentine or modulated shape when crimped.

This embodiment is substantially the inverse of the prior embodiment of FIG. **1**; i.e., rather than forming the crimp ribs or features by forming cavities in the crimp element material, the features **258** are formed or raised above the plane of the material.

The features **258** are also ideally configured with somewhat rounded distal (engagement) edges as shown in FIG. **2***b*, thereby mitigating damage to the filament during crimping by way of sharp or highly angular corners.

As with other embodiments, a comparatively softer material is optionally used to form the crimp element **250**, so as to further mitigate or eliminate damage to the filament which might weaken it (and the crimp assembly as a whole).

The bending or folding region **260** of the crimp element **250** is kept free from crimp features **258** as shown, so as to facilitate uniform bending of the material in that region without weakening of the material, which could reduce its "clamping" force when crimped (i.e., the force needed to separate the two crimp regions **254**, **256** when crimped over the filament).

Manufacturing Methods

Referring now to FIG. **3***a*, an exemplary embodiment of the method **300** for manufacturing the assembly of FIG. **1***g* according to the invention is described.

It will be appreciated that while the following discussion is cast in terms of the exemplary embodiments shown and described with respect to FIGS. **1**-**2***a* herein, the methods of the present invention are in no way limited to such particular apparatus.

In step **302** of the method **300**, a rolled or otherwise continuous sheet of a metal alloy is punched using a progressive stamping equipment to form the end crimp element assembly **150** of FIG. **1***e*. The progressive stamping equipment utilized is adapted to stamp the parts on a continuous sheet. The continuous sheet is then rolled onto another reel for later use. Either in serial or in parallel, progressive stamping equipment is also used to form the central crimp element assembly **160** of FIG. **1***f*.

In step **304**, the head elements **110**, **182** of the crimp elements of both assemblies **150**, **160** are preformed to form an approximate 180 degree bend as best shown in FIG. **1**. The preformed bend allows the filament **120** to be easily inserted and held in the crimping head element **110** prior to crimping, when utilized in the automated manufacture equipment **400** of FIGS. **4**-**4***c*. Note also that step **304** could alternatively be made part of the progressive stamping die utilized in step **302**, and thus the head **110**, **182** of the crimp elements **100**, **180** would therefore be preformed prior to being wound onto a reel.

In step **306**, the filament wire **120** (e.g. SMA Nitinol) is routed into the pre-formed crimping head elements **110**, **182** using a filament routing apparatus and the filament wire **120** is crimped while the crimping element assemblies **150**, **160** are separated from the reel. To accomplish this, a first continuous stamping (e.g. end crimp element assembly **150**) is fed into the manufacturing apparatus **400** utilizing a stepper motor. A locating pin engages the stamping at the indexing hole **134** and holds the stamping in place. Filament wire is routed using filament guides into the head element **110**. If the filament wire is an SMA such as Nitinol, tension is required in order to ensure proper function of the assembly in the end-user application (such as e.g. SMA linear actuators). For embodiments containing SMA wire, an apparatus is used to maintain a constant and consistent (i.e., uniform, and consistent across multiple assemblies) wire tension of 15-30 g as the wire is placed and routed in the end crimping element heads **110**, although other tension values can be used. Wire tension is also optionally monitored in step **306** either continuously or at intermittent time intervals.

In step **308**, the preformed crimping head **110** is crimped to secure the filament **120** to the end crimping elements as best shown in FIGS. **1***c*-**1***d*. With the filament wire in place, the crimp tool applies holding pressure to the end crimp element assembly **150**. A pre-specified number of end crimp elements (e.g. four (4)) are sheared from the continuous strip end crimp element assembly. After shearing, the crimp tool continues to a hard stop to complete the crimping of the filament wire to the end crimping element head **110**. Note that typical SMAs such as Nitinol can typically recover stress induced strain by up to about eight (8) percent; therefore, in applications where filament length is relatively small, it is critical to maintain accurate spacing of the end crimping elements connected by the SMA wire. This is the most significant reason for the requirement to maintain proper tension before and during crimping. After crimping, tension is no longer needed on the filament wire **120**.

For mixed assemblies, i.e. those that utilize two or more different crimping elements such as that shown in FIG. **5***c*, and after crimping the end crimping element assembly **150**, a locating pin locks the central crimping element assembly **160** into place and advances the central crimping element assembly **160** into the manufacturing apparatus **400** using a stepper motor and the locating pin. The same filament wire utilized for the previously crimped end crimping element assembly **150** is routed into the head **182** of the central crimping element assembly **160**. Again, the crimp tool applies holding pressure to the stamping, the central crimping element assembly **160** is separated from the rest of the continuous stamping and the crimp is completed to the central crimping element head **182**, locking the filament wire in place. Herein lies yet another advantage of the crimp configuration and method of the present invention; i.e., that the crimp heads **110**, **182** can maintain a crimped filament in a constant and unyielding position after the crimp is completed.

Either serially or in parallel to steps **306** and **308**, in step **305**, PVC sheeting having a thickness of approximately 0.5 mm is punched or otherwise perforated to form the overall dimensions of the PVC carrier strips **170**, as well as providing standard indexing holes **172**. The indexing holes **172** are preferably punched at the same pitch as the indexing holes **134**, used on the end crimping element assembly **150** and center crimping element assembly **160**. This is to insure no error in tolerancing when the crimping element assemblies are later assembled onto the carrier **170**. The resultant PVC sheeting is then placed onto an industry-standard carrier reel adapted for use on a machine; e.g., one adapted for automated placement of components.

In step **307**, the stamping pocket slots **176** and additional part indexing holes **174** are punched or formed into the carrier at a predesignated pitch (e.g., utilizing a user-designated custom pitch). The stamping pocket slots **176** are utilized for clearance during singulation stages after the crimping element assemblies are attached to the carrier. By separating the stamping performed in step **307** from the stamping in step **305**, custom dimensions for the indexing holes can be used, advantageously allowing for multiple uses of a single step **305** produced carrier tape. Note that it is envisioned that these steps could alternatively be combined into a single processing step; however, as is disclosed in the current embodiment, it is in many instances desirable to index these features separately so that the indexing pitch may be readily changed without having to re-punch or perforate the entire carrier **170**.

In step **310** of the method **300**, the crimped assemblies are assembled onto the carriers **170** as best shown in FIGS. **1***g* and **5***d*. A tape **510** or adhesive is utilized to secure the assemblies to the carriers **170**. For example, the relevant portions of the tape carrier surface may have an adhesive disposed thereon, or a tape can be applied to capture the filament between the tape and the carrier strips **170**. The carrier **170** and the crimped assemblies are indexed using a walking beam **450** or similar mechanism which also acts to advance the assembly through the apparatus **400**. Other approaches readily known to those of ordinary skill may also be used.

In step **312**, the crimped and taped assemblies are loaded into a pneumatic die or the like, and singulated so that the two parallel unitary carriers **170** (see FIG. **1***g*) are separated into two individual carrier tapes with loaded assemblies of the end crimps **100**, central crimps, **180**, and filament **120**. See also FIG. **5***e* which shows these assemblies after singulation.

In step **314**, the singulated carrier tape assemblies are loaded; e.g., onto reels for shipment to the end customer, or further processing.

It will be appreciated that any number of combinations of crimping and filament tension may be applied in accordance with various aspects of the present invention. For example, one variant of the methodology described above comprises crimping one end of a filament, and then crimping the other end while placing the filament under tension.

In another variant, the exemplary crimp elements are used in a "loose piece" fashion; e.g., wherein the filament is tensioned, and two or more crimps are applied (e.g., crimped onto what will become the ends of that segment of the filament) under tension.

Automated Manufacture Equipment

Referring now to FIGS. **4**-**4***f*, exemplary embodiments of the manufacturing apparatus **400** adapted to perform the method **300** of FIG. **3** is described in detail.

In the illustrated embodiment, the equipment **400** comprises a plurality of stations, each of which perform a specific task in the manufacture of the end product (e.g., that shown in FIG. **5***e*) and described with regards to FIG. **3**. Actuators, including walking beam **450**, of the apparatus **400** utilize locating hole features on the stampings to advance the product from station to station. While the equipment **400** will be described primarily in the context of pneumatic actuators driven by a programmable logic controller ("PLC") such as an integrated circuit (IC) microcontroller or digital processor having a computer program running thereon, it is appreciated that myriad other approaches such as e.g. the use of servo or stepper motors for some or all of the movement and actuation functions, separately or in combination with the PLC, could be used consistent with the principles of the present disclosure.

The exemplary apparatus **400** shown in FIG. **4** generally comprises the following stations: (1) a de-reeling station **402** which houses the end crimping element carrier assemblies **150**, **160** (also shown in FIG. **4***a*); (2) a filament (e.g., SMA) tensioning station **406** which keeps the SMA wire such as e.g. Nitinol or other filament under proper tension as it is despooled (also shown in FIG. **4***b*); (3) a linear slide station **410**, which alternates the end crimping element carrier assemblies **150**, **160** into the series of stations that follows (also shown in FIG. **5***a*); (4) a singulation station **412***a* which singulates the proper number of end and central crimp element assemblies **150**, **160** from the reel station **402** (also shown in FIG. **4***d*); (5) a crimping station **412***b* which crimps the end and central crimp elements to the wire under tension (also shown in FIG. **4***d*); (6) a carrier tape punching station **424** that provides indexing holes and slots to the carrier tape (also shown in FIGS. **4***c* and **4***e*); (7) a taping section **416** that tapes the crimped parts to the carrier tape; (8) another singulation station **420** which singulates the two carrier tape assemblies into two (2) single (parallel) carrier assemblies (also shown in FIG. **4***f*); and (9) a reeling station **432** which reels the final separated parts onto a spool for shipment to an end customer. The following stations will now be described in detail.

Referring now to FIG. **4***a*, the present embodiment of the apparatus **400** comprises two reels **402** (only one being shown for sake of clarity) which are utilized to house the stamped crimp element assemblies **150**, **160** of FIGS. **1***e* and **1***f*. These reels **402** contain end product from a continuous progressive stamping or other comparable process, and are easily transported and stored. The reels **402** are supported by a modular and mobile stand **404**, which positions the reels at a convenient height, and allows the reels **402** to freely rotate as they are unwound. In the present embodiment, each reel **402** despools in a counter-clockwise rotation with the crimp assemblies **150**, **160** exiting from the bottom of the reel.

The spool itself comprises a polymer hub with cardboard flanges, although this is but one of many possible configurations. These materials are chosen because they are readily available and cost effective.

The modular stand **404** comprises an aluminum or aluminum alloy, although other materials could be chosen if desired. Aluminum is desirable because, inter alia, it is easily machineable, is lightweight, cost effective, and readily available. Leveling feet **403** are also utilized to make sure the station **402** is level and square during operation of the equipment **400**. A payout system using a motor and associated controller, and motion arm (or sensor beam) is used in the exemplary embodiment to ensure that the material is dispensed at an appropriate rate.

In an alternate embodiment, the reel station **402** can be obviated by or replaced with the progressive stamping equipment of the type well known in the art that manufactures the crimp element carrier assemblies previously discussed. The manufactured crimp elements can then be utilized in the automated manufacture equipment **400** immediately following their completion, however such an embodiment tends to be more complicated and provides less operational flexibility than the embodiment of FIG. **4**.

Referring now to FIG. **4***b*, various of the stations utilized in the automated manufacture apparatus **400** are described in greater detail.

The tensioning station **406** comprises one or more tensioned spools **409** followed by one or more routing spools **408**. A tensioner **407** maintains a uniform tension of between 15-30 g of tension on the SMA (e.g. Nitinol) filament **120** being routed into the subsequent stations. The tensioning station **406** optionally comprises a monitoring apparatus (not shown) disposed proximate to the tensioning spool so that proper tension can be monitored on a periodic or even continuous basis. The tensioning station **406** acts to maintain an accurate tensioning of the filament **120** being crimped into the crimping elements **100**, **182**. This ensures that the final assembly **550** will actuate accurately in order to control the end-user device properly.

The tensioning station spool(s) **409** and routing spool(s) **408** are advantageously designed to prevent the SMA wire from twisting during the process of being unwound. It is understood by the Assignee hereof that twisting the SMA wire prior to crimping may produce adverse affects on the accuracy of the strain recovery during actuation in the end-user device. Therefore, the tensioning station **406** spools and routing spools **408** are ideally positioned inline with the subsequent wire crimping station **414** so as to mitigate any torsion or other such effects. Further, the tensioning station spools **409** can also optionally be configured to slide laterally as the SMA wire un-spools, thereby helping to ensure that the SMA wire does not become significantly twisted during the routing and crimping processing steps to be discussed subsequently herein. The routing spool **408** advantageously contains a diameter approximately equal to or larger than that of the spool **409** of the tensioning station **406**. This feature further ensures that undue stress is not added to the SMA wire **120** by introducing too small of a diameter routing spool. Other features to mitigate stress (such as curved or polished spool surfaces, guides, etc.) can also be utilized to provide optimal transit of the filament between locations within the apparatus **400**.

Referring now to the linear slide station **410** of FIGS. **4** and **4***b*, one exemplary embodiment of the slide station **410** acts to both (i) advance the crimp element carrier assemblies **150**, **160**, as well as (ii) alternate the two separate assemblies into the crimping and taping portions of the equipment **400**. As is best illustrated in FIGS. **5***a* and **5***b*, the linear slide station **410** of one embodiment comprises a sliding linear block **411** with guides **413** and corresponding rotating gears (not shown) with a plurality of driver teeth. Each of the crimp element carrier assemblies **150**, **160** have their own respective rotating gear and guide **413**. The gear teeth are driven by a stepper motor of the type well known in the electrical arts, and adapted to mechanically couple with the indexing holes **134**, and advance the carrier assemblies **150**, **160** as desired toward the subsequent apparatus station **415**. The sliding linear block slides laterally (transverse) to the direction of crimp element propagation, thereby indexing the crimp elements **150**, **160** using the same mechanism. In one embodiment (FIG. **5***a*), this is accomplished with two motors with gears, on the block slides, that feed the crimp element(s) to the same die area using lateral movement, followed by motion of the gears to move the assembly forward.

In the current embodiment, the slide station **410** will first advance the end crimp element carrier assembly **150** to the singulating station **412**. A total of four (4) end crimping elements **100** will be singulated from the reel as shown in FIG. **5***b*. Next the linear slide block **411** will position the central crimp element carrier assembly **160** to the singulating station **412**. There, a total of two (2) central crimp elements **100** will be singulated, and the aforementioned process will be repeated. The main purpose of the slide station **410** is to be able to efficiently interlace the end and central crimp elements originating from different reels **402** onto the same crimping and taping line. This provides significant efficiencies in terms of space consumed by the apparatus as well as indexing accuracy. Other benefits of this arrangement include ease of changing reels, reloading parts, and adjusting for cutoff.

While discussed primarily in terms of two different supply reels (one for each of the different crimp elements **150**, **160**), it is envisioned that more than two reels can be utilized.

Further, if only one reel is utilized, the entire sliding station may be obviated for a simpler assembly that merely drives the end crimping element carrier assembly into the resultant processing stations.

In yet another alternate embodiment, the rotary gear **504** may be obviated in place of a linear actuating device (not shown) or other comparable mechanism present on the slide station **410**.

Referring now to FIG. **4***d*, the singulating **412***a* and crimping **412***b* stations are described in detail. In the illustrated embodiment, the singulating station **412***a* comprises a hardened tool steel die set operated by a pneumatic cylinder, although other approaches (e.g., electromotive force such as via solenoids or motors) may be used in place thereof, or in combination therewith. The press is operated by a pneumatic cylinder controlled by the aforementioned PLC device. The press acts to singulate the end crimp element carrier assemblies **150** and central crimp element assemblies **160** from their respective reels as the reels are advanced through the die while in the same motion crimping the filament wire into either the end or central crimping element assemblies.

The hardened steel die set comprises an anvil, a stripper plate (which firmly holds the assembly in place during the cutting operation), filament wire routing apparatus and a cutting/crimping die. As the die opens, actuators retract and allow the end crimping element carrier assembly **150**, **160** to advance within the die using the walking beam **450**. Prior to being stamped, the walking beam **450** disengages and other actuators engage the end and/or center crimping element carrier assembly and hold the piece in place as it is singulated. Singulating dies are well understood in the mechanical arts and as such will not be discussed further herein.

In the illustrated embodiment, the crimping station **412***b* of the apparatus **400** operates to crimp each of the end and central crimp elements **100**, **180** to the Nitinol filament wire **120** that has been routed via the routing apparatus. The crimping station **412***b* of this embodiment is similar to the aforementioned singulating station **412***a* in that it comprises a hardened die steel set operated by the same pneumatic press as before, however other approaches (e.g., electromotive force such as via solenoids or motors) may be used in place thereof, or in combination therewith. Alternatively, the crimping and singulating dies could be separated into two separate die structures if desired. These and various other alternatives may readily be implemented by one of ordinary skill given the present disclosure.

In the illustrated embodiment, the press is operated by a pneumatic cylinder controlled by the aforementioned PLC device. The resultant assembly **550** produced by this process (after three (3) singulating/crimping cyles) is best shown in FIG. **5***c*, with the assembly **550** comprising two Nitinol filament wires **120** attached on either end to an end crimp element carrier assembly **150**. Because the singulation and crimping occurs in the same die set, control of the apparatus **400** is simplified. In between the two end crimp element assemblies **150**, a central crimp element carrier assembly **160** is also crimped to the Nitinol wire **120**.

Referring now to FIGS. **4***c* and **4***e*, the exemplary embodiment of the carrier tape punching station **424** is described in detail. The carrier is fed from a reel (not shown) and advanced to the carrier tape punching station **424**. The carrier **170** themselves may advantageously comprise Electronic Industries Alliance (EIA) compliant components, so that the final product assembly **550** may be placed using industry standard automated processes, although custom or proprietary designs are also contemplated. The carrier punching station comprises a die set having a part indexing punch **440** to produce an indexing punch hole **174** (see FIG. **1***g*). The die set also comprises a slot punching die **438** to punch the pocket slot **176** shown in FIG. **1***g*. The slot punching die **438** creates the pocket slot **176** in the carrier **170** and is utilized to ensure adequate clearance during processing steps (i.e. singulation) to the end and center crimping element assemblies that are performed after these assemblies have been mounted to the carrier (i.e. at station **420**). The entire press is operated using a pneumatic press cylinder **422** controlled by a controller, such as the aforementioned PLC controller, although non-pneumatic variants are also contemplated as previously described.

A rotary actuator utilizes the punched sprocket holes **172** to advance the carrier **170** through the station **424** and onto subsequent manufacturing stations. Note that it is preferable that the pitch between sprocket holes **172** be identical to the pitch used on the crimping element assemblies **150**, **160**. By maintaining an identical pitch, the crimping element assemblies and carrier tape can be advanced together (such as by using the aforementioned walking beam **450**) ensuring proper alignment between the various components during subsequent processing steps. Referring back to station **424**, the punched carrier tape **170** is then routed to a position past the aforementioned crimping station **414** via a pulley **436** using a de-reeler motor (not shown). The carrier is routed so that the crimp/filament assembly **550** (FIG. **5***c*) may be placed onto the carrier **170**. The entire station **424** (excluding the reel) is mounted on a mounting stand **428** comprising an aluminum structure, although other types of support structures can be readily substituted.

Referring again to FIG. **4***b*, the exemplary embodiment of the carrier taping station **416** is described in detail. The taping station comprises a spool **417** and a pulley **419** adapted to route a cover tape **510** down to the crimped assemblies and the carrier **170**. The spool **417** comprises a plurality of cover tape **510** windings (not shown). A placement mechanism routes the tape, with the adhesive side down, onto the crimp/filament assemblies **550**, which have been routed over the carrier tape **170** and aligned therewith using the aforementioned walking beam **450**. The assemblies **550** are then secured to the carrier **170** by the tape **510**, as is best shown in FIG. **5***d*. This process utilizes a mechanism which places light pressure to secure the tape to the assemblies **550** and the carriers **170**. The use of cover tapes **510** for securing electronic components to carriers **170** are well understood in the electronic packaging arts and as such will not be discussed further herein. It will be appreciated, however, that other approaches may be used in place of the aforementioned taping process, such as coating the relevant side of the carrier tape with an adhesive (which could also be activated and/or cured upon exposure to heat, UV light, electrical current, etc.), thereby allowing the crimp/filament assemblies **150** to be placed atop the carrier **170** and bonded directly thereto. Spot-application of adhesives or other bonding agents could also be utilized.

Referring now to FIG. **4***f*, the singulation station **420** is shown which comprises a singulation die adapted to remove the end and central crimp element carriers **130** after the assemblies **550** have been secured to their respective carrier tapes **170**. The singulation station **420** comprises one or more hardened steel dies **421** operated by a pneumatic press **418**, similar to the first singulation station **412**. The die and anvil set of the present singulation die **421** removes the end and central crimp carriers (salvage strips) **130**, rather then singulating the crimp element carrier assemblies **150**, **160** from the reeling station **402**. The singulation station **420** will also advantageously separate the filament wire at a predesignated location to further separate the carrier assemblies so that they each comprise two (2) end crimping elements **100**; a filament wire **120**; and a center crimping element **180**. As best shown in FIG. **5**; the resultant assembly **190** with the end crimping element carrier **130** assemblies' removed effectively results in two separate carrier tape assemblies **570**.

While primarily contemplated as processing two separate carrier tape assemblies **570** in parallel, in order to reduce material waste during the initial progressive stamping of the crimp element carrier assemblies **150**, **160**, more or less tape assemblies could be processed at the same time, as would be readily apparent to one of ordinary skill given the present disclosure. For example, the apparatus **400** can be readily adapted to process four (4) carriers **170** and two sets of parallel end crimps **100** and central crimps **180**, so as to produce four final assemblies **570**.

It will be recognized that while certain aspects of the invention are described in terms of a specific sequence of steps of a method, these descriptions are only illustrative of the broader methods of the invention, and may be modified as required by the particular application. Certain steps may be rendered unnecessary or optional under certain circumstances. Additionally, certain steps or functionality may be added to the disclosed embodiments, or the order of performance of two or more steps permuted. All such variations are considered to be encompassed within the invention disclosed and claimed herein.

While the above detailed description has shown, described, and pointed out novel features of the invention as applied to various embodiments, it will be understood that various omissions, substitutions, and changes in the form and details of the device or process illustrated may be made by those skilled in the art without departing from the invention. The foregoing description is of the best mode presently contemplated of carrying out the invention. This description is in no way meant to be limiting, but rather should be taken as illustrative of the general principles of the invention. The scope of the invention should be determined with reference to the claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A crimped filament assembly, comprising:

at least one crimp element assembly, said at least one crimp element assembly comprising:

a filament wire; and

a plurality of crimp heads, each of said crimp heads comprising a metal alloy with a plurality of crimping cavities configured to retain said filament wire therein, at least two of said plurality of crimp heads crimped to said filament wire; and

a carrier, said carrier facilitating automated processing of said at least one crimp element assembly;

wherein said carrier comprises a polymer material that is configured to have said at least one crimp element assembly affixed thereon; and

wherein said at least one crimp element assembly is affixed to said polymer material carrier using an adhesive.

2. The assembly of claim **1**, wherein said crimp heads have at least one surface adapted for picking by a pick-and-place apparatus, and said carrier further comprises a cover tape, said carrier having at least one aperture or notch formed therein in order to expose said at least one surface.

3. The assembly of claim **1**, wherein said filament wire comprises a shape memory alloy, and said crimping cavities are disposed to form a substantially serpentine channel that receive at least a portion of said filament wire.

4. The assembly of claim **3**, wherein said filament wire comprises a Nickel-Titanium shape memory alloy, and said crimp heads comprise a material having a hardness less than that of said shape memory alloy so as to preclude substantial deformation of said filament wire alloy during crimping.

5. The assembly of claim **1**, wherein said carrier is configured to maintain at least one dimension of said crimp element assembly for subsequent processing.

6. The assembly of claim **5**, wherein said at least one dimension comprises a spacing between two components.

7. The assembly of claim **1**, wherein said carrier runs adjacent at least a portion of said filament wire, said adjacent portion of said carrier protecting said filament wire during at least product transport.

8. A crimped filament assembly, comprising:

at least one crimp element assembly, said at least one crimp element assembly comprising:

a plurality of crimp heads, each of said crimp heads comprising:

a first plurality of cavities, said first plurality of cavities disposed at a spacing which creates a first plurality of features; and

a second plurality of cavities, said second plurality of cavities disposed at a spacing which creates a second plurality of features;

wherein said first and second pluralities of cavities are substantially opposite to, yet substantially offset from, one another when said crimp head is crimped, thereby forming a substantially serpentine channel therebetween for receiving a filament; and

a filament, at least two of said crimp heads being crimped to said filament; and

a carrier, said carrier facilitating the automated processing of said at least one crimp element assembly.

9. The crimped filament assembly of claim **8**, wherein said first and second cavities have substantially rounded edges, said substantially rounded edges mitigating deformation of at least a portion of said filament during crimping.

10. The crimped filament assembly of claim **8**, wherein said filament comprises a Nickel-Titanium shaped memory alloy wire.

11. The crimped filament assembly of claim **8**, wherein said filament comprises a Nickel-Titanium shape memory alloy wire, and said crimp heads comprise a material having a hardness less than that of said shape memory alloy so as to preclude substantial deformation of said filament alloy during crimping.

12. The crimped filament assembly of claim **8**, wherein said carrier is configured to maintain at least one dimension of said crimp element assembly for subsequent processing.

13. The crimped filament assembly of claim **12**, wherein said at least one dimension comprises a spacing between two adjacently disposed crimp heads.

14. The crimped filament assembly of claim **8**, wherein said carrier runs adjacent at least a portion of said filament, said adjacent portion of said carrier protecting at least said filament during at least product transport.

15. A method of manufacturing a crimped filament assembly comprising a plurality of crimp heads each comprising a first metal alloy with a plurality of crimping cavities configured to retain a filament wire therein, a filament comprising a second metal alloy, and a carrier that facilitates automated processing of the assembly, the assembly manufactured according to the method comprising:

disposing the plurality of crimp heads on the carrier in a substantially longitudinal and aligned orientation;

disposing said filament in the crimping cavities of at least two of the plurality of crimp heads;

placing at least a portion of the filament between the at least two crimp heads under tension;

crimping said at least two crimp heads so as to form said assembly;

disposing said crimped assembly onto a polymer carrier; and

securing said crimped assembly to said polymer carrier utilizing an adhesive, said adhesive configured so as to not leave any residue on said portions of said crimped assembly that are in contact with said adhesive.

16. The method of manufacturing the crimped filament assembly of claim **15**, wherein said act of crimping is performed so as to:

(i) avoid any substantial deformation of said filament; and

(ii) cause said filament to assume a substantially serpentine shape within at least said crimp heads, said substantially serpentine shape fixedly retaining said filament within each of said at least two crimp heads.

17. The method of manufacturing the crimped filament assembly of claim **15**, further comprising:

placing said disposed crimped assembly on said polymer carrier onto a continuous reel.

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