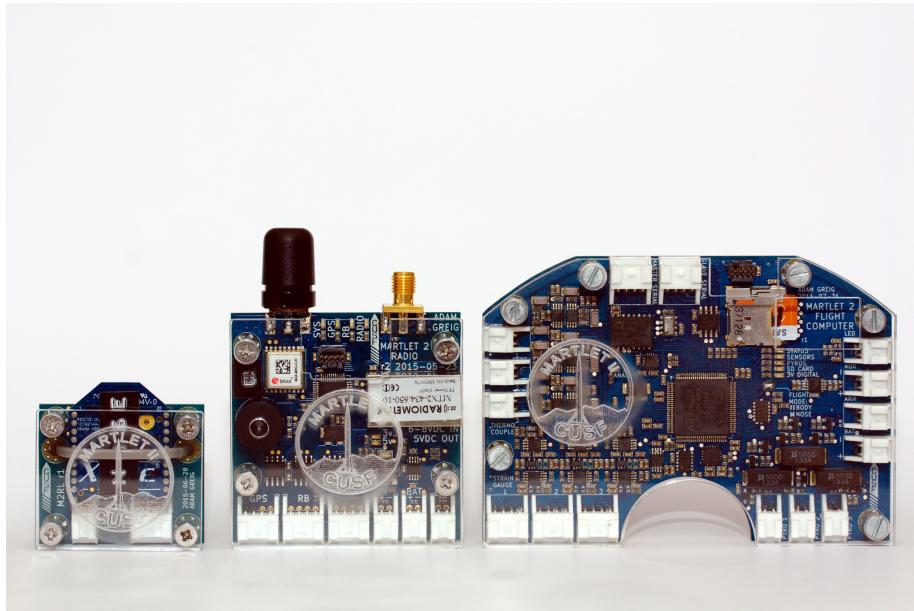


Martlet II Avionics Postmortem

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Introduction

Martlet 2 was an amateur rocket designed, built, and launched by Cambridge University Spaceflight in 2013-2015. It was intended to reach a speed of around 1km/s and an altitude of around 15km, establishing a new UK amateur altitude record.

After a scrubbed launch due to weather in October 2014, Martlet 2 was launched in October 2015 from Black Rock Desert, Nevada, USA. An anomaly occurred three seconds into the flight, resulting in the rapid and thorough destruction of the rocket including the avionics.



Figure 1: Martlet 2 in Black Rock Desert, Nevada, in October 2014

A custom set of avionics was designed for Martlet 2. After the scrubbed launch, some were updated to address issues in the original designs. This document is a postmortem and a retrospective of those avionics, reviewing the original design and evaluating the choices made and lessons learnt for future avionics programmes.

This postmortem is concerned with the avionics and their integration with the larger rocket system, but will not discuss matters solely related to the rocket or other components, nor will it detail the flight anomaly except insofar as it relates to the avionics design and possibility for future improvements.

Objectives

The original objectives for the avionics were, in priority order:

1. Control the recovery system deployment
2. Downlink rocket position information for recovery purposes
3. Record vital rocket parameters (altitude, velocity, acceleration, location)
4. Downlink additional information
5. Record additional sensors, including inertial, strain, and temperature

Think carefully about precise objectives and priority. Lots of time was wasted on things that were not mission critical to the detriment of those that were.

Hardware

The early design called for a pyrotechnic board M2P to control the recovery system, a radio board M2R for downlinking position, and a datalogging board M2D to record flight data. The decision was made early on to combine the pyrotechnic board and the datalogging board into a flight computer M2FC, as they required very similar sensors and software. In retrospect, it seems likely that keeping these separate would have been beneficial: the recovery system could be simpler and thus more reliable, and the datalogger could be worked on in isolation allowing better collaboration with less risk of compromising the main objectives.

Consider maintaining modularity even when integration is tempting; it preserves isolation and separation of concerns.

Little thought was put into the whole system design early on, such as interlinking the avionics and regulating and distributing the power supply. Much of this had to be designed once the rest of the avionics were finalised, which led to a worse solution.

Consider how individual components will form the complete system before finalising their design.

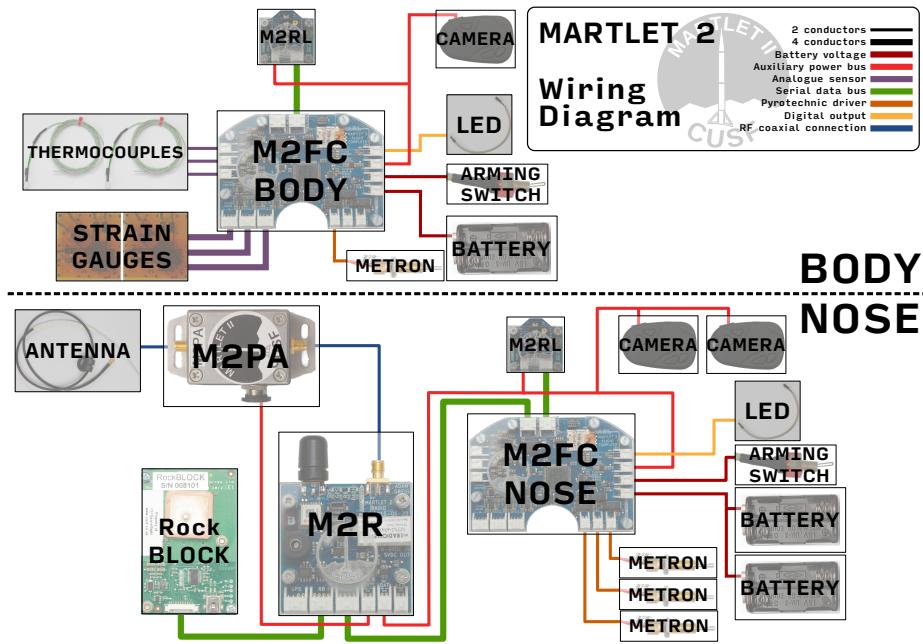


Figure 2: System Overview

Hardware Overview

PCB Design & Manufacture

All PCB design was performed in KiCAD. Setting up a common library of component symbols and footprints from the beginning would probably have saved time. The current procedure for carefully checking schematic and board layout led to only a single mistake in production: the powered isolator ADuM5201 was given a normal-width SOIC16 footprint where the datasheet called for a wide variant. Luckily the chip was easily modified by folding the legs around so this did not present a serious issue in production.

Careful and thorough checking of the PCB designs, including against the CUSF checklist, resulted in very few issues on a complicated design.

Manufacture was by reflow soldering and had no issues beyond a few small solder bridges which were readily reworked. Again standard procedures seem to have worked very well here.

Analogue Section

Pyrotechnic Drivers

Inertial Measurement Unit

- Magno was unreliable
- So was gyro
- I2C to blame?
- Accels calibrate offset obviously, need to rotate for scale

SD Card

Radio Power Amplifier

Inter-Board Communications

Arming Concept

Other Hardware

Beyond M2FC and M2R there were several other electronics systems on Martlet 2, some integrated with the main avionics.

Cameras

We originally fitted a GoPro Hero camera and a Mobius ActionCam, both activated manually (the GoPro over the radio) before launch. After the 2014 scrub, the camera plan was updated to use only “808 #16” cameras, configured to begin recording when power is applied. They were then connected to M2FC’s auxiliary power output, so they began recording when the rocket was armed. This system worked very well and made final arming easier. Unfortunately during the flight anomaly the cameras were broken up and the SD cards were lost.

Small 808 cameras worked well. Activating them via the main avionics was a good idea. In future, secure the SD cards as well as possible, perhaps by gluing.

Backup Tracker

As a backup locating device, a Joey tracker was installed in Martlet 2 as well. It had its own independent power supply, GPS, and radio. While this was not

required in the event, its presence was reassuring and there is no reason to believe it would not have worked (had it not been torn to pieces during flight).

Use a totally separate and independent tracker for backup.

Recognised Altimeter

To ensure the altitude reached would be recognised for record keeping purposes, a commercial altimeter (a PerfectFlite model) was fitted. This was necessary but otherwise did not add a huge amount to the system. No particular issues were encountered here.

Satellite Modem

M2R connected to a RockBLOCK Iridium satellite modem, which could relay position information from anywhere in the world. While a nice backup, this was probably not necessary at the launch site (a complete flat) and added complication to the avionics design and mounting. In the event the satellite modem did not have a chance to send any messages. In theory it is quite functional and would be useful on a future project where this level of backup communication is required.

Satellite modems can work well but consider if it is really required for a given flight, compared to the mass, power, and complexity cost.

Radio Power Amplifier

After the 2014 scrub, the power amplifier was moved off M2R and into its own box. This design worked well and the amplifier survived the flight. It's possible that in future returning to an integrated amplifier once the design is proven would have worked well too, simplifying avionics wiring.

M2RL

Strain Gauges and Thermocouples

- Assembly issues
- Potential to short out excitation, putting whole flight computer at risk

Power Supply & Distribution

The power distribution design was not considered until after the majority of the avionics were finalised. Each piece of avionics had been designed with the assumption that somehow around 6-7V of battery power would be available, as an appropriate voltage to regulate down to 5V and 3.3V for electronics systems while also providing enough margin to reliably fire the Metron protractors used in the recovery system. The design was therefore to use 4xAA lithium primary cells in a battery, connected to M2FC, which would then power the rest of the system once armed through the AUX connector.

In the original design, M2R had its own separate battery supply and thus arming/power switch. In the 2014 scrub update, M2R is instead powered on the AUX bus from M2FC, which uses both battery packs in parallel to give maximum capacity for the combined system. This new design allowed for a single power switch which reduced complexity.

Don't use separate batteries for otherwise interdependent and connected systems, it just increases complexity. Central power switching is nice.

Using lithium primary cells had some advantages for mass, power density, availability, and transport. CU Spaceflight have successfully used these cells for many varied missions so they were an obvious choice here. Being able to install a known-fresh set of batteries immediately prior to flight was reassuring, and being able to purchase these batteries at most large shops worldwide was likewise useful.

However, they necessitate battery holders which were all either difficult to mount securely, awkwardly shaped, or both. Reliable connections to the cells under the high acceleration conditions expected in flight was a pressing concern. In the original design, large Bulgin holders were used, but they were very awkward to fit in the mounting design. Post-scrub, smaller regular holders were used, but they did not provide any mounting points and were essentially friction fitted into a smaller compartment. Neither design was ideal, although it appears that the eventual design did provide power during acceleration.

In future it would be well worth considering a lithium ion rechargeable main system battery with a dedicated power distribution board that can monitor and provide power to system components individually. Voltages could be regulated to some extent centrally, and supply currents could be measured, providing useful debugging information. Recharging allows for shore power to be used via an umbilical, which means the rocket may be powered up and on the pad for long durations, reducing urgency once padded up.

Give more thought to power supply design and distribution, including the option of rechargeable batteries and an umbilical providing shore power.

Cabling & Connectors

- Spec55 is wonderful
- JST PA did a good job
- External connectors in future
- Connector in the airframe?
- Umbilical to shore?

Mounting & Enclosure

- More enclosed
- Easier to assemble
- No need to open to reprogram etc

External Switches & Arming

Human Interface

Testing

Software

Design

Real-Time Operating System

Calibration

Powerup Sequence

Safety Lockout

Ignition Detection

Status Monitoring & Sharing

Implementation

Timing

Testing

Ground Software

- Would have been nice...

Collaboration

Integration

- Mounting holes
- LEDs
- Sensors (SG/TC)
- Antennas
- Cameras

- Don't glue things
 - Really Really Really
 - LED broke off
 - Arming switch broke off
 - Other arming switch broke off
 - Arming key broke off
 - Both cameras broke off eventually
 - Don't glue things

Recommendations

Conclusions