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CLOSE APPROACHES BETWEEN SATELLITES IN CIRCULAR ORBITS

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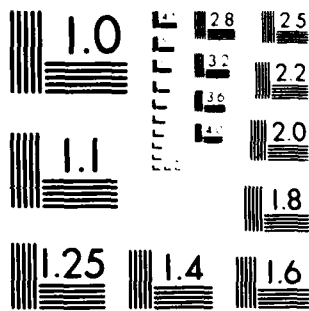
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Technical Report

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Close Approaches Between Satellites  
in Circular Orbits

T.S. Seay

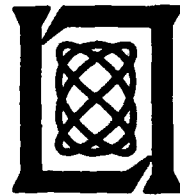
25 August 1983

Prepared for the Department of the Air Force  
under Electronic Systems Division Contract F19628-80-C-0002 by

**Lincoln Laboratory**

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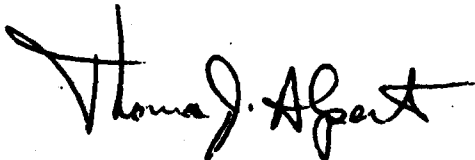
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**CLOSE APPROACHES BETWEEN SATELLITES  
IN CIRCULAR ORBITS**

*T.S. SEAY*

*Group 64*

TECHNICAL REPORT 644

25 AUGUST 1983

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ABSTRACT

The variation in range between two satellites in different circular orbits is of interest in many space system problems. This report provides a simple expression for the range and presents an analysis of the frequency and duration of close approaches. The results are applied to a simple satellite search problem. Some relationships for the range rate are also given.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to describe the behavior of the range between two spacecraft in different circular orbits. Specifically, we have a spacecraft, denoted by subscript 0, in a circular orbit of radius  $R_0$  and corresponding period  $T_0$ , which carries a sensor or other system characterized by an effective radius  $R_S$ . What is the maximum amount of time which can take place before a spacecraft, denoted by subscript 1, with orbital radius  $R_1$ , orbital period  $T_1$ , and relative inclination  $I$ , will come within the sphere defined by  $R_S$ ? What is the average amount of time that the spacecraft will spend within the range  $R_S$ ? What is the maximum rate-of-change of the range between the spacecraft?

In Section II a convenient form for the range between the two spacecraft is derived. Section III defines a close approach, and gives the time interval between two such approaches. We find a characteristic interval within which a close approach will occur, irrespective of the relative inclination between the two orbit planes. Section IV presents a calculation of the average time duration that the two spacecraft stay within a specified range, and it is observed that this time is minimized when the two orbit planes are perpendicular. Section V describes an application of the results to a spaceborne search problem. Finally, Section VI presents a simple upper bound on the maximum range rate between the two spacecraft.

## II. RANGE BETWEEN SPACECRAFT

Figure 1 illustrates the geometry of interest. The plane of spacecraft 1 is inclined with respect to the plane of spacecraft 0 by relative inclination angle  $I$ . This inclination angle is uniquely defined by requiring that for  $I = 0$ , both spacecraft are moving in the same direction.

This section presents a derivation for an expression giving the distance between the two spacecraft. Consider two rectangular coordinate systems with the x-axis in each corresponding to the line of intersection between the planes of the two orbits as shown in Fig. 1. The coordinate system 0 will be in the plane of motion of satellite 0 while coordinate system 1 will be in the plane of motion of satellite system 1. In each of the planes, the corresponding equations of motion of the satellites are

$$\begin{aligned} X_0 &= R_0 \sin \omega_0 t \\ Y_0 &= R_0 \cos \omega_0 t \end{aligned} \tag{II-1}$$

$$\begin{aligned} X_1 &= R_1 \sin(\omega_1 t + \phi) \\ Y_1 &= R_1 \cos(\omega_1 t + \phi) \end{aligned} \tag{II-2}$$

where

$$\omega_1 = \frac{2\pi}{T_1} \tag{II-3}$$

is the equivalent angular rate of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  satellite in its plane of motion. We have chosen  $t = 0$  to be the time that satellite 0 is at the intersection of the planes.  $\phi$  is the angular distance from satellite 1 to the intersection of

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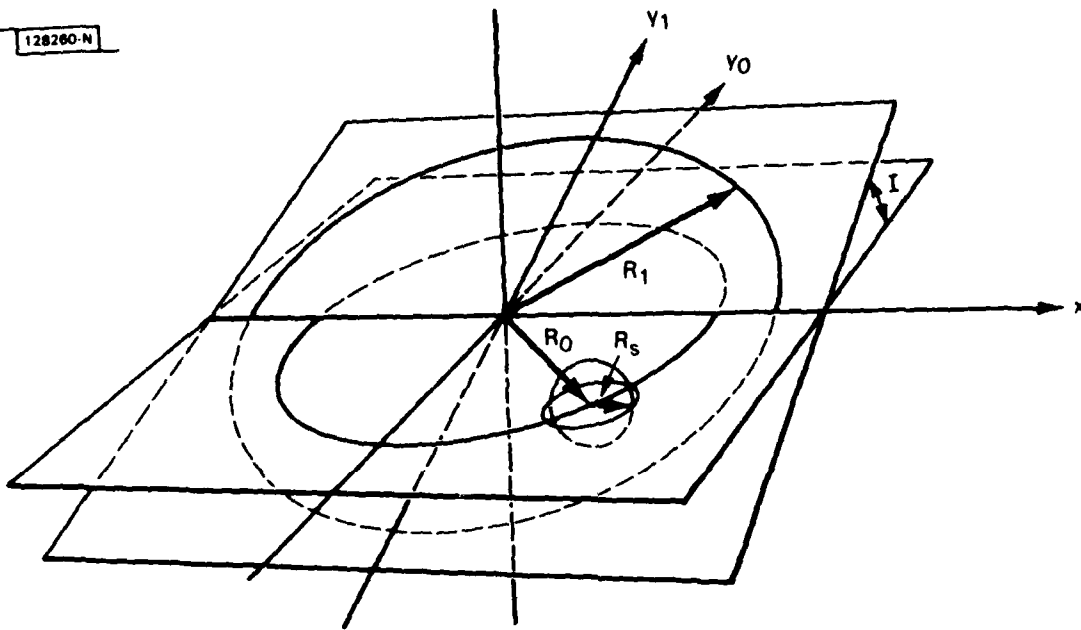


Fig. 1. Problem geometry.

the planes, in plane 1, at  $t = 0$ . Without loss of generality, we assume  $T_1 > T_0$ .

Now let  $X_1'$ ,  $Y_1'$ ,  $Z_1'$  be the coordinates of satellite 1 expressed in the plane of satellite 0. Then:

$$\begin{aligned} X_1' &= X_1 \\ Y_1' &= Y_1 \cos I \\ Z_1' &= Y_1 \sin I \end{aligned} \quad (II-4)$$

Denoting the distance between the two spacecraft as  $d$ :

$$d^2 = (X_0 - X_1')^2 + (Y_0 - Y_1')^2 + (0 - Z_1')^2 \quad (II-5)$$

Substituting, and using

$$1 + \cos X = 2 \cos^2 \frac{X}{2} \quad (II-6)$$

$$1 - \cos X = 2 \sin^2 \frac{X}{2} \quad (II-7)$$

we obtain

$$d^2 = (R_1 - R_0)^2 + 4R_0R_1 \left[ \cos^2 \frac{I}{2} \sin^2 \left( \frac{\omega_0 t - \omega_1 t - \phi}{2} \right) + \sin^2 \frac{I}{2} \cos^2 \left( \frac{\omega_0 t + \omega_1 t + \phi}{2} \right) \right] \quad (II-8)$$

As a simple check, Eq. (II-8) shows that the range varies between  $R_0 + R_1$  and  $R_0 - R_1$  when  $I$  is either 0 or  $\pi$ .

### III. CLOSE APPROACHES

For convenience, introduce:

$$\text{the difference frequency } \omega_{\Delta} \triangleq \omega_0 - \omega_1 \quad (\text{III-1})$$

$$\text{the sum frequency } \omega_{\Sigma} \triangleq \omega_0 + \omega_1 \quad (\text{III-2})$$

$$\text{the offset time } \tau \triangleq t - \frac{\phi}{\omega_{\Delta}} \quad (\text{III-3})$$

In these terms Eq. (II-8) can be rewritten

$$d^2 = (R_1 - R_0)^2 + 4R_0R_1 \left[ \cos^2 \frac{I}{2} \sin^2 \frac{\omega_{\Delta}\tau}{2} + \sin^2 \frac{I}{2} \cos^2 \frac{\omega_{\Sigma}\tau + \eta}{2} \right] \quad (\text{III-4})$$

where the equivalent angular advance  $\eta$  is:

$$\eta = \phi \left( 1 + \frac{\omega_{\Sigma}}{\omega_{\Delta}} \right) \quad (\text{III-5})$$

In Eq. (III-4), the [ ] contains a term with the difference frequency period

$$T_{\Delta} = \frac{T_0 T_1}{T_1 - T_0} \quad (\text{III-6})$$

corresponding to the difference frequency,  $\omega_{\Delta}$ , and a term with a sum frequency period

$$T_{\Sigma} = \frac{T_0 T_1}{T_1 + T_0} \quad (\text{III-7})$$

corresponding to  $\omega_\Sigma$ .<sup>\*</sup> Qualitatively,  $d^2$  consists of a constant term, a slowly varying positive term with period  $T_\Delta$ , and a rapidly varying positive term with period  $T_\Sigma$ . (Note that  $T_\Delta$  is greater than  $T_0$  or  $T_1$ , while  $T_\Sigma$  is less than either  $T_0$  or  $T_1$ .)

Since both terms within [ ] in Eq. (III-4) are positive, it is clear that the closest possible approach (i.e.,  $d = R_1 - R_0$ ) occurs only for those  $\tau$  such that  $\omega_\Delta \tau = k\pi$  for  $k$  integral, and  $\omega_\Sigma \tau + \eta = (\frac{2\ell+1}{2})\pi$  for  $\ell$  integral. Depending on the particular  $\omega_\Delta$ ,  $\omega_\Sigma$  and  $\eta$ , the time between such closest possible approaches could be extremely long.

However, as a practical matter, because of the great difference between  $\omega_\Sigma$  and  $\omega_\Delta$  for typical cases, we will consider the basic time interval  $T_\Delta$ . During each (half-open) time interval of duration  $T_\Delta$ , the term  $\sin^2 \frac{\omega_\Delta \tau}{2}$  in Eq. (III-4) has one (and only one) zero. During the same interval, the term  $\cos^2 \frac{\omega_\Sigma \tau + \eta}{2}$  will have  $\omega_\Sigma/\omega_\Delta$  zeros.<sup>\*\*</sup> Thus there will be a zero of the  $\cos^2$  term occurring within  $\frac{1}{2} T_\Sigma$  of the time at which the  $\sin^2$  term is zero. Therefore, within every time interval of duration  $T_\Delta$ , the satellites will come within the distance:

$$d_{\min}^2 < (R_1 - R_0)^2 + 4R_0R_1 \cos^2 \frac{I}{2} \sin^2 \frac{\pi}{2} \frac{\omega_\Delta}{\omega_\Sigma} \quad \text{(III-8)}$$

One implication of this expression is that the relative inclination between the orbital planes has a very small effect upon the range at closest approach for small  $\omega_\Delta/\omega_\Sigma$ . (Small  $\omega_\Delta/\omega_\Sigma$  corresponds to the case where the satellite periods are close to one another.) Furthermore, the characteristic period  $T_0$ , within which a close approach is certain to occur, is unaffected by the relative inclination.

---

\* From (II-6) and (II-7), the  $\sin^2$  and  $\cos^2$  terms have equivalent frequencies equal to twice their arguments.

\*\* For example, with 10% difference in periods, the  $\cos^2$  term will have 21 zeros in this interval.

#### IV. DURATION OF CLOSE APPROACHES

In this section the fraction of the basic time interval  $T_{\Delta}$  that the distance  $d$  is less than a characteristic radius  $R_S$  is studied. Specifically, the intent is to determine those time intervals for which

$$R_S^2 \geq (R_1 - R_0)^2 + 4R_0R_1 \cos^2 \frac{I}{2} \sin^2 \frac{\omega_{\Delta}\tau}{2} + \sin^2 \frac{I}{2} \cos^2 \frac{\omega_{\Sigma}\tau + \eta}{2} \quad (\text{IV-1})$$

which is rewritten as

$$\alpha \geq \cos^2 \frac{I}{2} \sin^2 \frac{\omega_{\Delta}\tau}{2} + \sin^2 \frac{I}{2} \cos^2 \frac{\omega_{\Sigma}\tau + \eta}{2} \quad (\text{IV-2})$$

where

$$\alpha = \frac{R_S^2 - (R_1 - R_0)^2}{4R_0R_1} \quad (\text{IV-3})$$

Unfortunately, there can be many time intervals within  $T_{\Delta}$  which satisfy inequality (IV-2), so that an accurate analytic solution is very difficult. Figure 2 illustrates this problem with a plot of the right-hand side of (IV-2) against the normalized time  $\tau/T_{\Delta}$  for  $I = 0, \pi/2,$  and  $\pi$  radians. The numerically determined percentage of time that inequality (IV-2) is satisfied (hereafter denoted by  $f$ ) is plotted in Fig. 3 as a function of  $I$  with  $R_1/R_0$  as a parameter for that value of  $\eta$  which minimizes  $f$ .<sup>\*</sup> As the reader may expect,  $I = \pi/2$  appears to give the lowest  $f$  that the two spacecraft are within the specified range. Figure 4 shows  $f$  for the case  $I = \pi/2$ , as a function of  $R_1/R_0$  for that value of  $\eta$  minimizing  $f$ . The irregularities in these curves appear to be caused by the complicated relationship among  $\omega_{\Sigma}$ ,  $\omega_{\Delta}$ , and  $\alpha$ .

Simple analytic upper bounds are obtained by considering each of the two products on the right-hand side of (IV-2) independently. Define the times  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  by the relations:

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<sup>\*</sup>  $\eta$  was tested in steps of  $\pi/18$  radians.

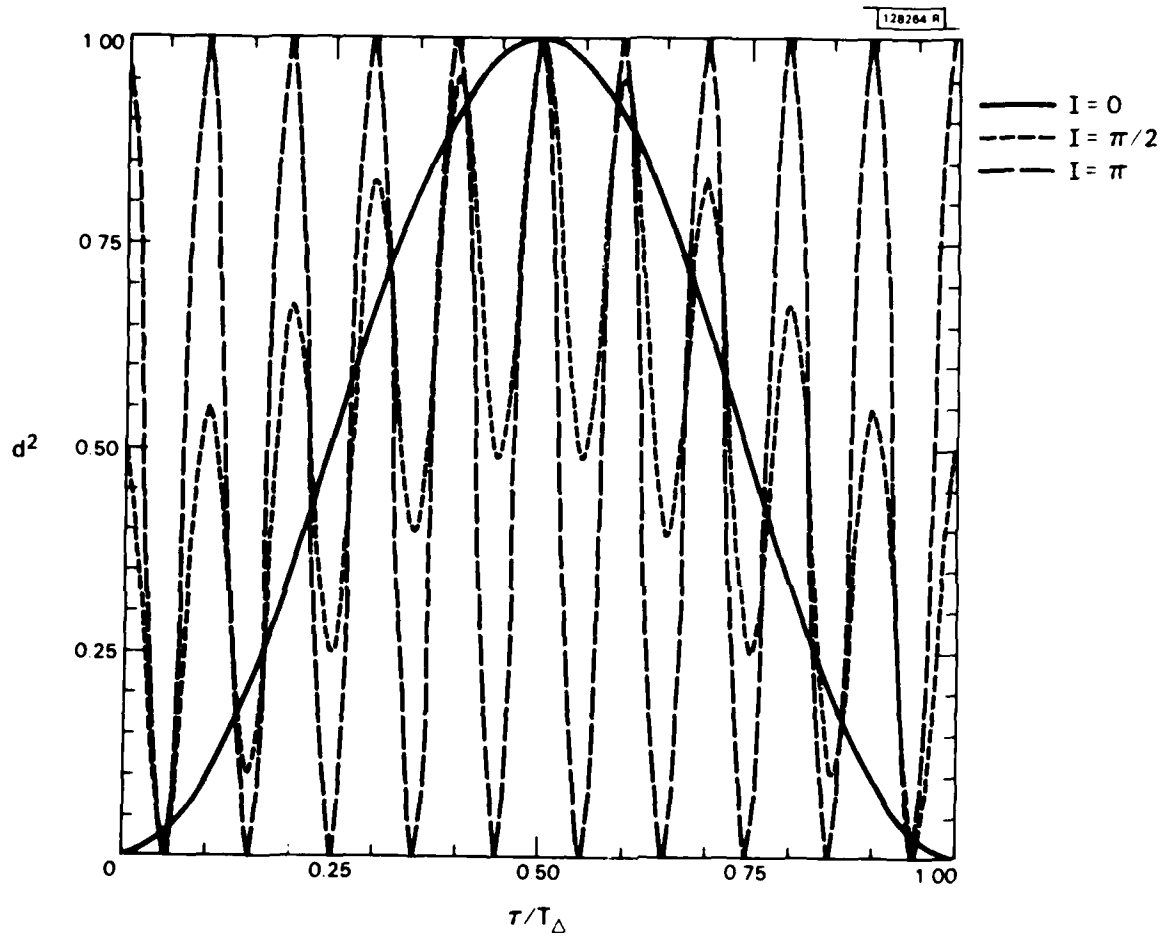


Fig. 2. Normalized squared distance  $d^2$  between two satellites as a function of normalized time  $\tau/T_{\Delta}$ .



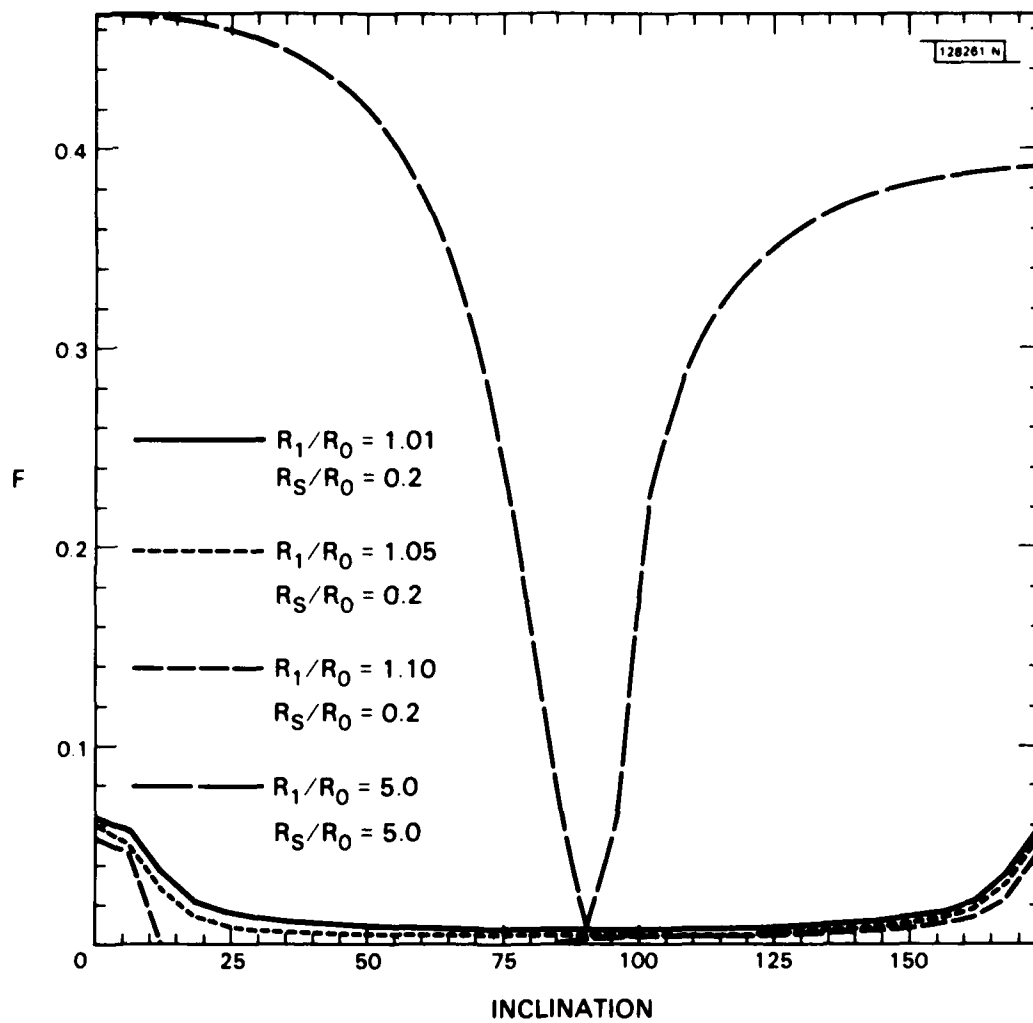


Fig. 3. Fraction of time two satellites are within the squared distance  $\alpha$  of one another, for worse case phase angle  $\eta$ .

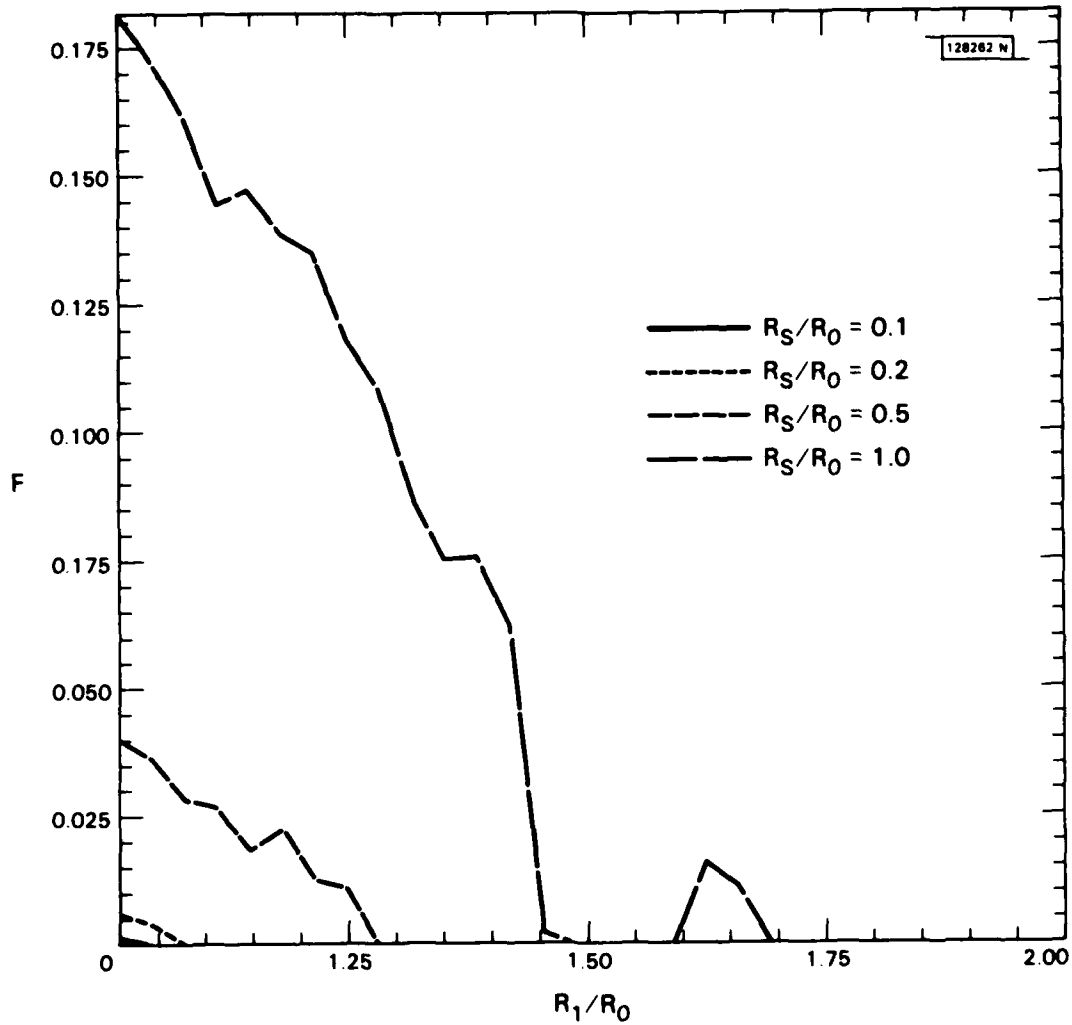


Fig. 4. Fraction of time two satellites with relative inclination  $I = \pi/2$  are within the normalized range  $R_0/R_0$  as a function of the ratio  $R_1/R_0$  of the satellite orbital radii, for worse case angle  $\eta$ .

$$\alpha = \cos^2 \frac{I}{2} \sin^2 \frac{\omega_{\Delta} T_1}{2} \quad (\text{IV-4})$$

$$\alpha = \sin^2 \frac{I}{2} \sin^2 \frac{\omega_{\Sigma} T_2}{2} \quad (\text{IV-5})$$

valid for  $\alpha < \cos^2 \frac{I}{2}$  and  $\alpha < \sin^2 \frac{I}{2}$ , respectively.  $T_1$  is the time duration over which  $\cos^2 \frac{I}{2} \sin^2 \frac{\omega_{\Delta} \tau}{2}$  rises from zero to  $\alpha$ , while  $T_2$  is the time duration over which  $\sin^2 \frac{I}{2} \cos^2 \frac{\omega_{\Sigma} \tau + \eta}{2}$  rises from zero to  $\alpha$ . Then  $fT_{\Delta}$ , the time within  $T_{\Delta}$  that (IV-2) is satisfied, is upper bounded by

$$fT_{\Delta} < (2T_1, 2 \frac{\omega_{\Sigma}}{\omega_{\Delta}} T_2) \quad , \quad * \quad (\text{IV-6})$$

where the factor  $\omega_{\Sigma}/\omega_{\Delta}$  in the second inequality reflects the number of zeros in an interval of length  $T_{\Delta}$ . Using the series expansion of  $\sin X$  to upper bound  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  as given in (IV-4) and (IV-5), and substituting into (IV-6), we obtain:

$$f < \left( \frac{2 \alpha^{1/2}}{\pi \cos I/2} , \frac{2 \alpha^{1/2}}{\pi \sin I/2} \right) \quad , \quad (\text{IV-7})$$

valid for all  $I$ .

A much tighter bound is easily derived for the case  $\alpha \ll \cos^2 \frac{I}{2}$ ,  $\alpha \ll \sin^2 \frac{I}{2}$ , by counting only the contribution of the zeros in the  $\sin^2 \frac{I}{2} \cos^2 \frac{\omega_{\Sigma} \tau + \eta}{2}$  term which occur in the region where the  $\cos^2 \frac{I}{2} \sin^2 \frac{\omega_{\Delta} \tau}{2}$  term is small. Then,

---

\* The notation  $A < (B, C)$  denotes  $A < B$  and  $A < C$ .

$$fT_{\Delta} < 2 \frac{\omega_{\Sigma}}{\omega_{\Delta}} T_2 \cdot \frac{2T_1}{T_{\Delta}} \quad . \quad (\text{IV-8})$$

After substitution, we have:

$$f < \frac{8}{\pi} \frac{\alpha}{\sin I} \quad , \quad (\text{IV-9})$$

valid only for  $\alpha \ll \cos^2 \frac{I}{2}, \sin^2 \frac{I}{2}$ . This bound should be quite tight in the region of small  $\alpha$  and  $I$  close to  $\pi/2$ . See Fig. 5.

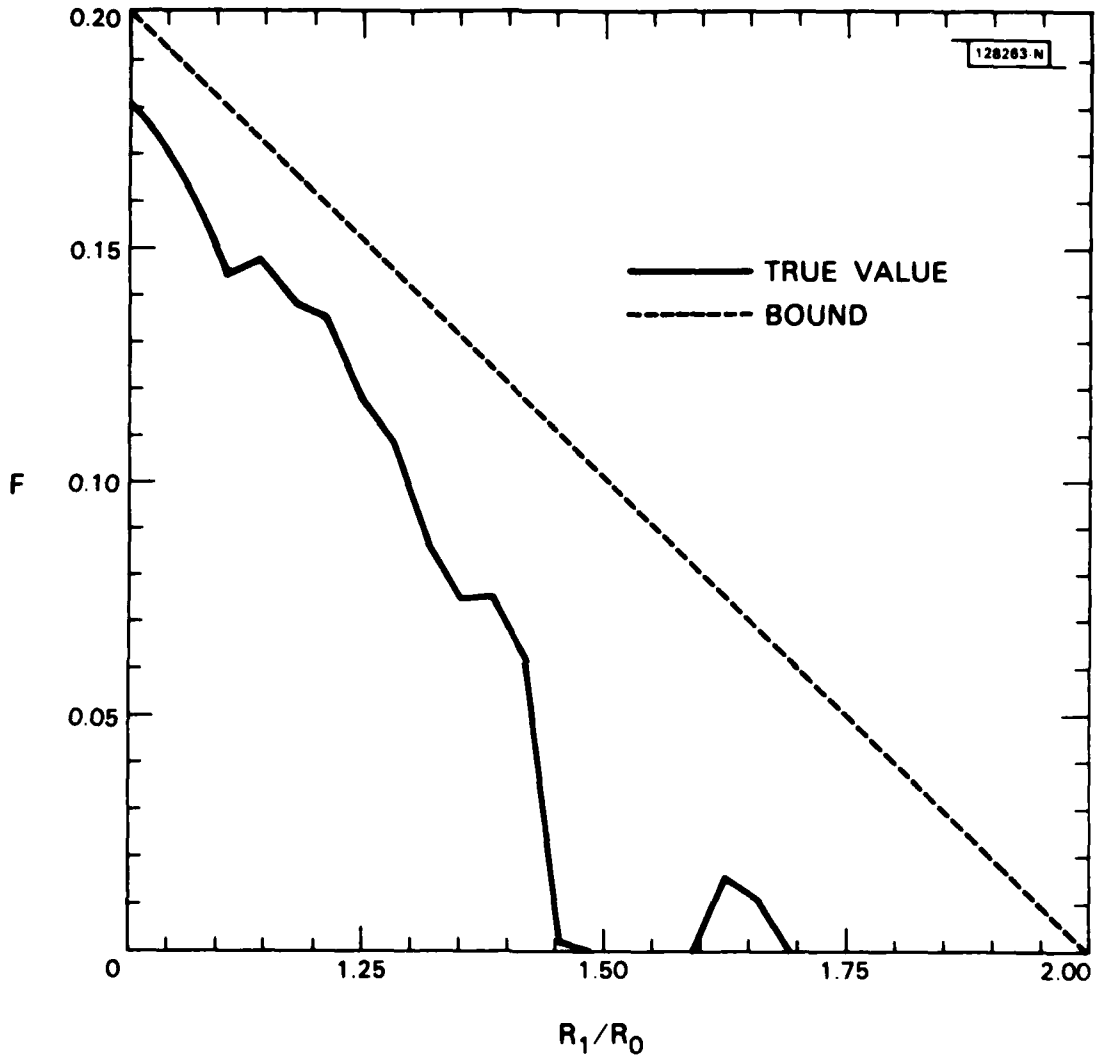


Fig. 5. Fraction of time two satellites are within normalized range  $R_s/R_0 = 1.0$ ,  $J = \pi/2$ .

## V. APPLICATION TO SATELLITE-BORNE SEARCH SYSTEMS

Consider a search satellite with circular orbit radius  $R_0$ , and a sensor with a detection range  $R_s$  which scans at random within a spherical cap whose center lies on the earth-satellite line from satellite 0. The boundary of the cap is determined by the intersection of the sphere of radius  $R_1$  ( $R_1 > R_0$ ) which characterizes the satellite being searched for with a sphere of radius  $R_s$  centered on the search satellite. By symmetry the following analysis also applies for a search system with the searcher at altitude  $R_1$  searching for satellites at altitude  $R_0$ , with a search system range of  $R_s$ . From the previous section it is clear that a satellite being searched for will lie within the cap a fraction  $f$  of the total time  $T_\Delta$ . In this section we will relate the solid angle search rate of the sensor system on board the searching spacecraft, to the total aggregate time required to achieve the specified probability of detection against the intended targets.

The sensor system is characterized by the angular resolution cell area  $\theta^2$ , the characteristic integration time  $\tau$ , and the single look probability of detection  $p_d$  which occurs when the intended victim satellite is within one or more resolution cells at range no greater than  $R_s$ .  $N$  is the number of parallel detectors operating at the same time.

Within the characteristic time  $T_\Delta$ , there will be  $fT_\Delta/\tau$  independent opportunities for the sensor to detect the satellite being searched for. Within the total time  $T_\Delta$ , the aggregate cumulative probability of missing the target is given by

$$p_m \leq \left(1 - \frac{N\theta^2}{\pi\psi^2} p_d\right)^{fT_\Delta/\tau} \quad (V-1)$$

Thus for a total search time  $T_s$  substantially greater than  $T_\Delta$  we obtain

$$p_m \leq \left(1 - \frac{N\theta^2}{\pi\psi^2} p_d\right)^{(fT_\Delta/\tau)(T_s/T_\Delta)} \quad (V-2)$$

In both of these expressions, the angular area of the cap is given by  $\pi\psi^2$  steradians, where  $\psi$  is the included half angle given by  $\cos \psi =$

$$\frac{R_0^2 + R_1^2 - R_s^2}{2R_0R_1} . \text{ It is easy to show, using (IV-3), that } \cos \psi = 1 - 2\alpha.$$

Hence for small  $\alpha$ ,  $\pi\psi^2 \approx 4\pi\alpha$ .

For the case where the detector tests only a small part of the sky at a time,  $N\theta^2/\pi\psi^2$  is small. Use of the exponential approximation yields

$$P_m \approx e^{\frac{-fT_s}{\tau} \frac{N\theta^2}{4\pi\alpha} P_d} \quad (V-3)$$

Solving to obtain the expression for search time:

$$T_s \approx \frac{4\pi\alpha \ln(1/P_m)}{fN\dot{\Omega} P_d} \quad (V-4)$$

where we have used the characteristic solid angle search rate:

$$\dot{\Omega} = \theta^2/\tau \quad (V-5)$$

In practice, the probability of detection for a sensor varies as a very strong power of the range to the target. In effect, there will be a characteristic range inside which the probability of detection will be essentially unity. Outside this range the probability of detection will be virtually zero. Therefore, for engineering purposes, we may approximate:

$$T_s \approx \frac{4\pi\alpha \ln(1/P_m)}{fN\dot{\Omega}} \quad (V-6)$$

where  $f$  is computed on the basis of the characteristic range  $R_s$  corresponding to a detection probability  $p_d$ , say, .9.

On the other hand, if  $N\theta^2 \geq \pi\psi^2$ , the sensor continuously monitors the cap. Then

$$p_m = (1 - p_d)^{fT_s/\tau} \quad (V-7)$$

which gives

$$T_s = \frac{\tau}{f} \frac{\ln p_m}{\ln(1 - p_d)} \quad (V-8)$$

with the restriction  $T_s \geq T_\Delta$ . Generally such a system would be operated to achieve  $T_s = T_\Delta$  with the given sensor characteristics.



## VI. RANGE RATE

In this section the range rate is derived. Equation (III-4) may be differentiated to give:

$$\dot{d}(\tau) = \frac{R_0 R_1}{d(\tau)} \left[ \omega_\Delta \sin \omega_\Delta \tau \cos^2 \frac{I}{2} - \omega_\Sigma \sin (\omega_\Sigma \tau + \eta) \sin^2 \frac{I}{2} \right] \quad (\text{VI-1})$$

Since  $|d(\tau)| \geq R_1 - R_0$ , we may upper bound the maximum range rate as

$$\dot{d}(\tau) \leq \frac{R_0 R_1}{R_0 - R_1} \left[ \omega_\Delta \cos^2 \frac{I}{2} + \omega_\Sigma \sin^2 \frac{I}{2} \right] \quad (\text{VI-2})$$

An equivalent form is

$$\dot{d}(\tau) < \frac{R_0 R_1}{R_0 - R_1} \left( \frac{2\pi}{T_0} - \frac{2\pi}{T_1} \cos I \right) \quad (\text{VI-3})$$

As it should, this expression illustrates the minimum peak range rate for coplanar satellites moving in the same direction ( $I = 0^\circ$ ), and maximum peak range rate for coplanar satellites moving in the opposite direction ( $I = 180^\circ$ ).

## VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

L. N. Weiner cheerfully generated all the numerical and graphical data in this note.

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM				
1. REPORT NUMBER ESD-TR-83-022	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO. AD-A133 779	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER				
4. TITLE (and Subtitle)  Close Approaches Between Satellites in Circular Orbits	5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Technical Report					
	6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER Technical Report 644					
7. AUTHOR(s)  Thomas S. Seay	8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)  F19628-80-C-0002					
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS Lincoln Laboratory, M.I.T. P.O. Box 73 Lexington, MA 02173-0073	10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS Project No. 649L Program Element No. 63250F					
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS Air Force Systems Command, USAF Andrews AFB Washington, DC 20331	12. REPORT DATE 25 August 1983					
	13. NUMBER OF PAGES 28					
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office)  Electronic Systems Division Hanscom AFB, MA 01731	15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Unclassified					
	15a. DECLASSIFICATION DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE					
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)  Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.						
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)						
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES  None						
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)  <table border="0" style="width:100%"> <tr> <td style="width:50%">circular orbits</td> <td style="width:50%">close approaches</td> </tr> <tr> <td>space system problems</td> <td>range rate</td> </tr> </table>			circular orbits	close approaches	space system problems	range rate
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