



Effects of ply drops on the fatigue resistance of composite materials and structures  
by Mark Ethan Scott

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in  
Chemical Engineering  
Montana State University  
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Abstract:

Material thickness variations are required to optimize the design of laminated composite structures. These thickness variations are accomplished by dropping layers of material (plies) along the structure to match the load carrying requirements. Unfortunately, these ply drops produce internal stress concentrations as a consequence of material and geometric discontinuities. This thesis provides a parametric experimental investigation of ply drops in E-Glass stranded fabric reinforced polyester composites and structures. These parameters include: ply drop location, laminate thickness, number of plies dropped at one location, fabric type, loading condition, fiber content, and spacing between ply drops. The damage which develops at ply drops is typically delamination cracks which propagate between the layers of reinforcing fabric.

There were two parts to this study: (1) to examine delamination propagation rates at ply drops and determine crack growth threshold levels, and (2) to determine the effect of ply drops on the lifetime of various composite materials. Tests were conducted on both small coupons of material and beam structural elements with ply drops in the flanges.

A strong sensitivity to ply drop position and manufacturing details is shown for fatigue damage initiation and growth. The results indicate that it will be difficult to completely suppress damage and delamination initiation in service. For  $0^\circ$  plies, single internal ply drops provide the greatest delamination resistance. Multiple ply drops should be spaced at correct intervals so that the delaminations from each do not overlap prior to arrest. It was found that, in most cases, there is a threshold loading under which little growth after initiation is noted. Delamination retardation techniques such as ply edge feathering, "Z-Spiking" and adhesive layers improve the delamination resistance in many cases. After delamination has occurred, especially with exterior ply drops, it can be repaired with adhesives. Ply drops adversely affect fatigue lifetime of low fiber content laminates more severely than for high fiber content laminates. The choice of fabrics used in a laminate can have a significant impact on delamination rates, but the lifetime of the laminate is insensitive to fabric type.

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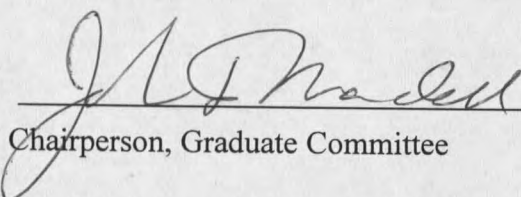
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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

Dr. John Mandell



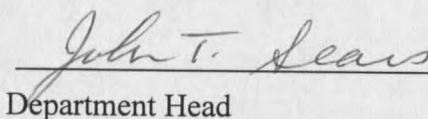
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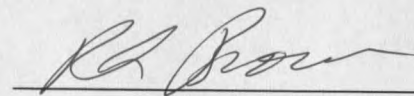
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	ix
ABSTRACT .....	xii
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. BACKGROUND .....	4
Strain Energy Release Rate .....	4
Tensile Testing of Dropped-Ply Laminates .....	8
Compression Testing of Dropped-Ply Laminates .....	9
Damage Accumulation .....	10
Stress Analysis on Dropped-Ply Laminates .....	11
Delamination Prevention .....	13
Existence of a Resin Rich Region .....	14
Design Considerations .....	15
Motivation for Thesis .....	18
3. EXPERIMENTAL METHODS AND MATERIALS .....	20
Test matrix and description of specimens .....	20
Material Preparation .....	29
Fabrics .....	31
Specimen Preparation .....	32
Test Facility and Development .....	33
DCB and ENF test specimens .....	35
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....	37
Delamination Study .....	37
Effect of Ply Drop Location .....	37
Effects of laminate thickness and multiple ply drops at the same position .....	43
The ESE and ESF laminates .....	44
Effect of Ply Drop Spacing .....	45
Effects of "Z-Spiking" .....	48
Effect of Tough Adhesive at Ply Drop .....	49
Effect of Butt-Joints .....	50
Effects of $\pm 45^\circ$ Ply Drops .....	51
Effect of A130 warp unidirectional fabric .....	52
Other attempts to prevent delamination .....	53

Repairing Delaminated Samples .....	55
Comparing different laminates .....	56
Effect of Ply Drops on Lifetime .....	57
Fiber Volume Content Effect .....	57
A130 fabric vs. D155 fabric .....	59
Resin Rich Region .....	62
Compression Testing .....	64
Residual Strength of Coupons .....	67
Ply Drops in Beams .....	70
Beam Geometry, Fabrication and Materials .....	70
Flange laminate ESA .....	73
Beam 39 .....	73
Beam 44 .....	76
Beam 48 .....	78
Flange laminate ESB .....	80
Beam 40 .....	80
Flange laminate ESG .....	81
Beam 41 .....	81
Beam 42 .....	85
Flange laminate ESH .....	86
Beam 49 .....	86
Beam 50 .....	89
Comparison of Delamination Rate in Beams and Coupons .....	90
Strain Energy Release Rate and Modeling Results .....	94
Determination of Critical Strain Energy Release Rate .....	94
Static and Threshold Strain Energy Release Rates at Ply Drops .....	97
 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	 100
Conclusions .....	100
Delamination at Ply Drops .....	100
I-Beam Study .....	101
Effect of Ply Drops on Lifetime .....	101
G <sub>c</sub> Tests .....	102
Recommendations .....	102
 REFERENCES .....	 103
 APPENDIX A	
Coupons Tested .....	108
 APPENDIX B	
Delamination Length vs. Cycles for Coupons .....	118

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Lay-up of fiberglass materials with Ply Drops .....	22
2. Test matrix .....	24
3. Comparison of delamination resistance of different ply drop configurations. ....	42
4. Slenderness ratios calculated using Equation 4 .....	65
5. Comparison of ESH laminate compressive strength with and without ply drops. ....	66
6. Residual strength of ESH laminate after being fatigued (R=0.1) .....	69
7. List of I-beams tested with ply drops .....	72
8. Reference notation for Beams 39, 44 and 48 with ESA Laminate .....	74
9. Delamination length vs. fatigue cycles for Beam 39 .....	75
10. Average delamination length vs. cycles for compression and tension flanges for Beam 44. ....	77
11. Delamination length vs. cycles for tension and compressive flanges on Beam 48. ...	79
12. Reference notation for Beam 40 with ESB laminate .....	81
13. Reference notation for Beams 41,42 with ESG laminate .....	83
14. Cycles vs. average tension and compression flange delamination length for beam 41 .....	84
15. Cycles vs. average tension flange delamination for Beam 42. ....	85
16. Cycles for tension and compression flange delamination on beam 49. ....	87
17. Reference notation for Beams 49 and 50 with ESH laminate. ....	88
18. Cycles vs. tension flange delamination length for beam 50. ....	91



19. Critical strain energy release rate for Mode I and Mode II cracks .....	97
20. ESA and ESB critical static strength.....	97
21. Static strain energy release rates .....	98
22. Threshold strain energy release rates .....	99

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Common structural elements with discontinuities from Ref. 1 .....	2
2. The three modes of fracture from Broek [2] .....	5
3. Typical load vs actuator displacement for DCB specimen. ....	7
4. Typical load vs actuator displacement for a ENF specimen. ....	8
5. Cross-sectional and edge view of ESB laminate showing ply drop. ....	28
6. Different delamination prevention techniques. ....	30
7. Lay-up of laminate with ply drops in mold .....	31
8. DCB and ENF specimens .....	35
9. Delamination of exterior zero degree ply drop. ....	38
10. Typical static failure of laminate with ply drop. ....	38
11. Delamination length vs. cycles for ESA laminate, $R = 0.1$ , Exterior $0^\circ$ Ply Dropped .....	39
12. Delamination at an interior ply drop showing two delamination fronts. ....	39
13. Delamination length vs cycles for ESB (Single interior $0^\circ$ ply drop) laminate, $R=0.1$ . ....	40
14. Delamination length vs. cycles for ESC (Single center interior $0^\circ$ ply drop) laminate, $R=0.1$ . ....	41
15. Illustration of resin rich region in ESH laminate. ....	45
16. Delamination length vs. cycles for laminates ESB, ESH, ESF (all interior ply drops) at a maximum running stress of 275 MPa, $R=0.1$ .....	46

17. Effect of different spacing between ply drops, R=0.1, ESI laminate (Two, 0° ply drops) at 276 MPa, $V_f=0.35$ .....	47
18. ESI coupons run at 276 MPa, R=0.1. ....	47
19. Delamination length vs. cycles for ESJ "Z-Spiked" laminate compared to ESA (Single, exterior 0° ply drop) laminate, R= 0.1. ....	48
20. Delamination length vs. cycles for laminates ESA, ESK, ESG, ESE (all exterior ply drops) at a max. running stress of 138 MPa, R=0.1. ....	49
21. ESL laminate in tension at the ply drop (Interior 0° ply drop with Hysol adhesive) failed at 276 MPa. ....	50
22. Delamination length vs. cycles for ESA, JKA "Feathered" and JKA random laminates at a maximum running stress of 207 MPa, R=0.1. ....	53
23. Delamination initiating along tows which were pulled out. ....	54
24. Delamination length vs. cycles for ESB and JKB "Feathered" at a maximum running stress of 275 MPa, R=0.1. ....	54
25. Delamination length vs. cycles at 207 MPa, R=0.1, initial ESA laminate compared to repaired ESA laminate. ....	55
26. Effect of fiber content on the normalized S-N Data, R=0.1, for DD materials [0/±45/0]s compared to ESH laminate (Two interior 0° Ply drops). ....	58
27. S-N curve (R=0.1) comparing D155 Fabric (DD6) to A130 Fabric (DD11) control materials with no ply drops, from Reference 50. ....	60
28. Fatigue life of ESH (Two D155 ply drops) vs. ESQ (Two A130 ply drops) laminates (Maximum stress is on the thin side of the ply drop). ....	60
29. Tensile fatigue S-N data for ESQ (Two 0° internal ply drops) vs. control DD11 (no ply drops) laminates, A130 unidirectional fabric. ....	61
30. Damage developing around thermoplastic beads as a result of fatigue loading, R=0.1. ....	62
31. Photomicrograph of ESH laminate showing resin rich regions ahead of ply drops. ....	62

32. Side view of crack propagating through ESH laminate .....	63
33. Tensile fatigue (R=0.1) S-N curves for ESB (Single 0° internal ply drop) and ESH (Two interior 0° ply drops). .....	63
34. Compressive stress vs. percent strain for ESH 804 coupon. ....	65
35. I-Beam testing apparatus .....	71
36. Beam coordinate system .....	71
37. Beam 39 with ESA laminate for flange material. ....	76
38. Tension and compression flange on Beam 44. ....	78
39. Beam 48, ESA laminate, tension and compression flanges. ....	80
40. Beam 40 .....	82
41. Beam 41 .....	84
42. Beam 42, ESG laminate (Two exterior 0° ply drops) on flanges .....	86
43. Beam 49 with ESH (Two internal 0° ply drops) flange material. ....	89
44. Beam 50 with ESH (Two interior 0° ply drops) laminate as flange material. ....	90
45. Beam (Tension Flange) vs. Coupon Data (R=0.1) for ESA (Single exterior 0° ply drop), R=0.1. ....	92
46. Beam (tension flange) vs. coupon data for ESH laminate (Two Interior ply drops), R=0.1. ....	92
47. Mode I coupon geometry. ....	95
48. Mode II specimen geometry. ....	96

**ABSTRACT**

Material thickness variations are required to optimize the design of laminated composite structures. These thickness variations are accomplished by dropping layers of material (plies) along the structure to match the load carrying requirements. Unfortunately, these ply drops produce internal stress concentrations as a consequence of material and geometric discontinuities. This thesis provides a parametric experimental investigation of ply drops in E-Glass stranded fabric reinforced polyester composites and structures. These parameters include: ply drop location, laminate thickness, number of plies dropped at one location, fabric type, loading condition, fiber content, and spacing between ply drops. The damage which develops at ply drops is typically delamination cracks which propagate between the layers of reinforcing fabric.

There were two parts to this study: (1) to examine delamination propagation rates at ply drops and determine crack growth threshold levels, and (2) to determine the effect of ply drops on the lifetime of various composite materials. Tests were conducted on both small coupons of material and beam structural elements with ply drops in the flanges.

A strong sensitivity to ply drop position and manufacturing details is shown for fatigue damage initiation and growth. The results indicate that it will be difficult to completely suppress damage and delamination initiation in service. For  $0^\circ$  plies, single internal ply drops provide the greatest delamination resistance. Multiple ply drops should be spaced at correct intervals so that the delaminations from each do not overlap prior to arrest. It was found that, in most cases, there is a threshold loading under which little growth after initiation is noted. Delamination retardation techniques such as ply edge feathering, "Z-Spiking" and adhesive layers improve the delamination resistance in many cases. After delamination has occurred, especially with exterior ply drops, it can be repaired with adhesives. Ply drops adversely affect fatigue lifetime of low fiber content laminates more severely than for high fiber content laminates. The choice of fabrics used in a laminate can have a significant impact on delamination rates, but the lifetime of the laminate is insensitive to fabric type.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Today's need for stronger, lighter and cheaper structures has generated much interest in materials development, especially in composite materials. Fiber-reinforced composites have played a leading role in the technological advancement of structural material systems. Typically, fiber-reinforced composites are known for being light weight, high strength materials which are more durable than conventional materials. The use of composite materials in structural applications is rapidly increasing for commercial applications. With this increased use comes the need for a better understanding of the performance of the structures fabricated from composite materials, called composite structures. A large portion of composite structures are comprised of layered, laminated composite materials; thickness variations in such laminates are achieved by changing the number of plies in proportion to the thickness change. This requires the termination of layers, or plies, within the laminate, which then introduces a characteristic flaw into the material.

Laminated composites typically are fabricated from planar sheets of material, so that all fibers are oriented in a plane. Careful design and selection of the in-plane fiber

orientation can create a laminate that is designed to carry the loads very efficiently in the plane of the fiber reinforcement. However, an inherent weakness of the laminate is the lack of fiber reinforcement in the direction normal to the fiber orientation. Consequently, the interlaminar direction, normal to the plane of reinforcement, is the weakest direction of the laminated material system. Therefore, any interlaminar loads that are applied to or induced within the structure are of particular concern in terms of structural integrity.

Figure 1, from Ref. 1, illustrates five structural elements used in laminated composite structures that produce interlaminar stresses. These common elements are the free edge, the open hole, the ply drop, and bonded or bolted joints. Free edges are unavoidable in many structures. Open holes are commonly employed to allow access to the internal parts of the structure. When the design calls for a laminate that is tapered in thickness, discontinuous layers or plies are utilized. It is also common to insert

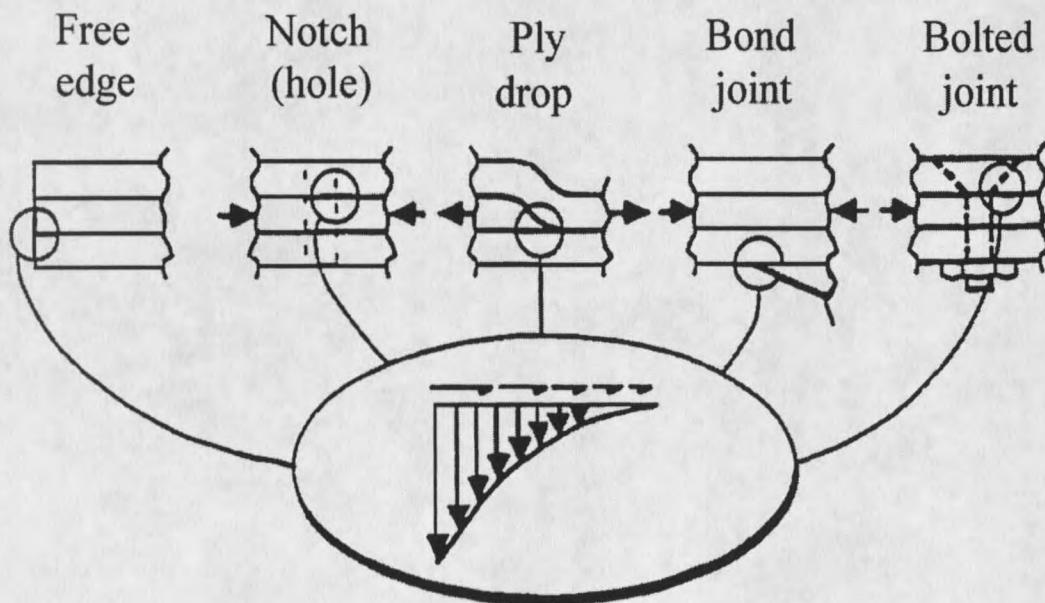


Figure 1. Common structural elements with discontinuities from Ref. 1

discontinuous plies to create a local build-up or thickening at high stress points. Finally, bonded or bolted joints are required to attach multiple sub-components of the structure.

Each of the structural elements shown in Figure 1 develop significant out-of- plane normal and shear forces when the component is under load. These interlaminar loads are acting on the plane of minimum strength and toughness of the laminated structure.

Therefore, each of these structural elements have the potential to cause a delamination of the individual layers. In addition, most analyses and failure models do not account for these interlaminar loads. The interlaminar performance of these critical structural elements provides a limit to the structural performance of the composite structure. It is important to note that the approach taken in this thesis is also directly applicable to some degree to all of the interlaminar stress risers illustrated in Figure 1.

The approach in this work was to focus on the ply-drop configuration. This is an unavoidable flaw if the thickness is to be tapered, and has received limited attention in the literature with respect to low cost composites of this type under fatigue loading. A parametric experimental study of the influence of various geometric details of ply drops was carried out using laminate coupons, in terms of both the delamination resistance and the reduction in fatigue lifetime. The work is then extended to ply drops in the flanges of larger I-beam structures.



## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND

This Chapter reviews the basic mechanics of delamination in terms of the strain energy release rate. Several key problem areas associated with thickness transitions in composite laminates are then identified and discussed. Issues in need of an increased research effort are identified.

#### Strain Energy Release Rate

Once a crack is initiated in a structure it can be further propagated in any of three different modes, or a combination of these. Figure 2 shows the three modes of crack growth. Mode I is an "opening mode" crack, which is caused by normal stresses. In-plane shear causes Mode II or "sliding mode" cracks and Mode III cracks are caused by out-of-plane shear and are known as "tearing mode" cracks [2].

The strain energy release rate,  $G$ , is based on the Griffith criterion [2]. Griffith stated that crack propagation will occur if the energy released upon crack growth is sufficient to provide all the energy that is required for crack growth. The Griffith equation can be represented as

$$\frac{dU}{da} = \frac{dW}{da} \quad (1)$$

where  $U$  is the elastic strain energy and  $W$  the energy required for crack growth.  $G$  is equal to  $dU/da$  and is sometimes called the crack driving force. The energy consumed during crack propagation is denoted by  $R$ , which is equal to  $dW/da$ , and is called the crack resistance. Thus,  $R$  is equal to the critical strain energy release rate to cause crack extension.

There is a different critical strain energy release rate for each mode of crack growth. A subscript denotes the particular mode. The critical strain energy release rate is

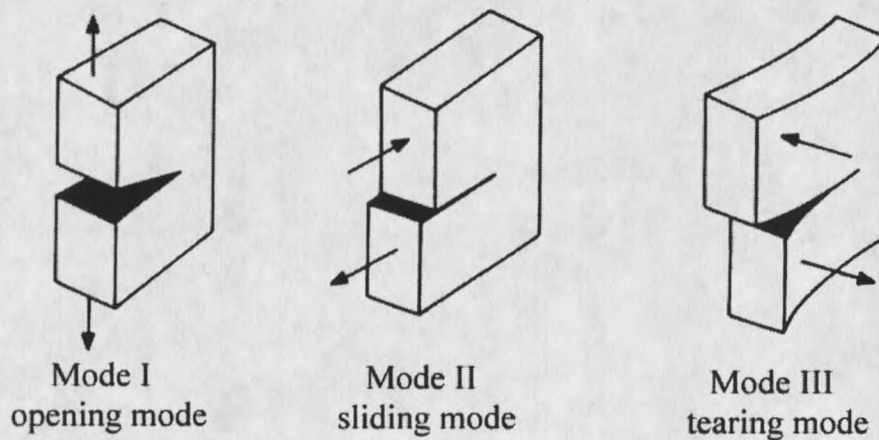


Figure 2. The three modes of fracture from Broek [2].

denoted with a “c” in the subscript following the mode designation. Above this value of  $G$ , in simple linear elastic fracture mechanics [2], a crack will propagate unstably in the structure. If there is a mechanism which produces increased crack resistance as the crack

extends, the crack will propagate according to some R-curve behavior, requiring higher  $G$  values as crack extension occurs [2].

To determine an opening mode, or Mode I, strain energy release rate for delamination, a double cantilever beam (DCB) specimen is used. The critical strain energy release rate can be obtained by determining the area enclosed by the loading and unloading curves on a load-displacement diagram, which is the incremental change in stored strain energy,  $U$ , with crack extension  $\Delta a$ . A typical loading-unloading diagram for a DCB specimen can be seen in Figure 3. Another method to determine  $G_I$  values

$$G_{Ic} = \frac{12P_c^2 a^2}{EB^2 h^3} \quad (2)$$

uses an analytic formula (Eq. 2) proposed by Benbow and Roesler [3] and Gilman [4] which takes into account the strain energy generated due to the bending moment of the DCB test, where  $a$  is the crack length,  $E$  the modulus parallel to the crack direction,  $B$  the laminate width,  $h$  is the half height and  $P_c$  is the critical load. Many  $G$  values can be obtained from a single DCB specimen which allows a crack resistance ( $R$ ) curve to be generated, indicating how ( and if ) the resistance to crack growth changes with increasing crack length.

To determine Mode II crack growth resistance, it is necessary to use a different test method to determine the corresponding strain energy release rate. End notched flexure (ENF) tests apply a load to the center of the coupon; when the applied load

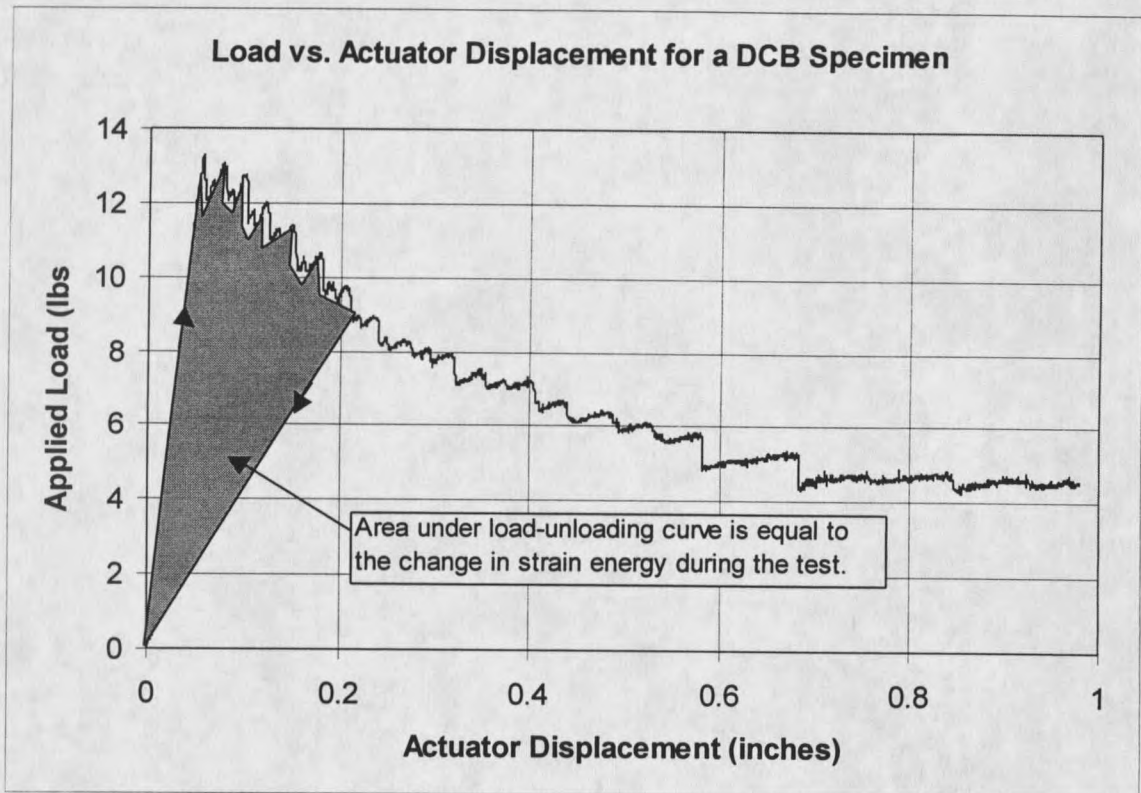


Figure 3. Typical load vs. actuator displacement for DCB specimen.

reaches a critical value, the crack propagates suddenly toward the center where the load is applied. In this type of test, there is only one data point collected as compared with the many points for the DCB specimen due to the instability of crack growth in the ENF specimen. A typical load-actuator displacement graph is shown in Figure 4. Since the load-displacement diagram is unstable for Mode II tests, an analytic formula is necessary to determine a G value. The formula proposed by Russell and Street [5] to calculate  $G_{IIc}$  is

$$G_{IIc} = \frac{9P_c^2 a^2}{16E_x w^2 h^3} \quad (2)$$





















































































































































































































































































