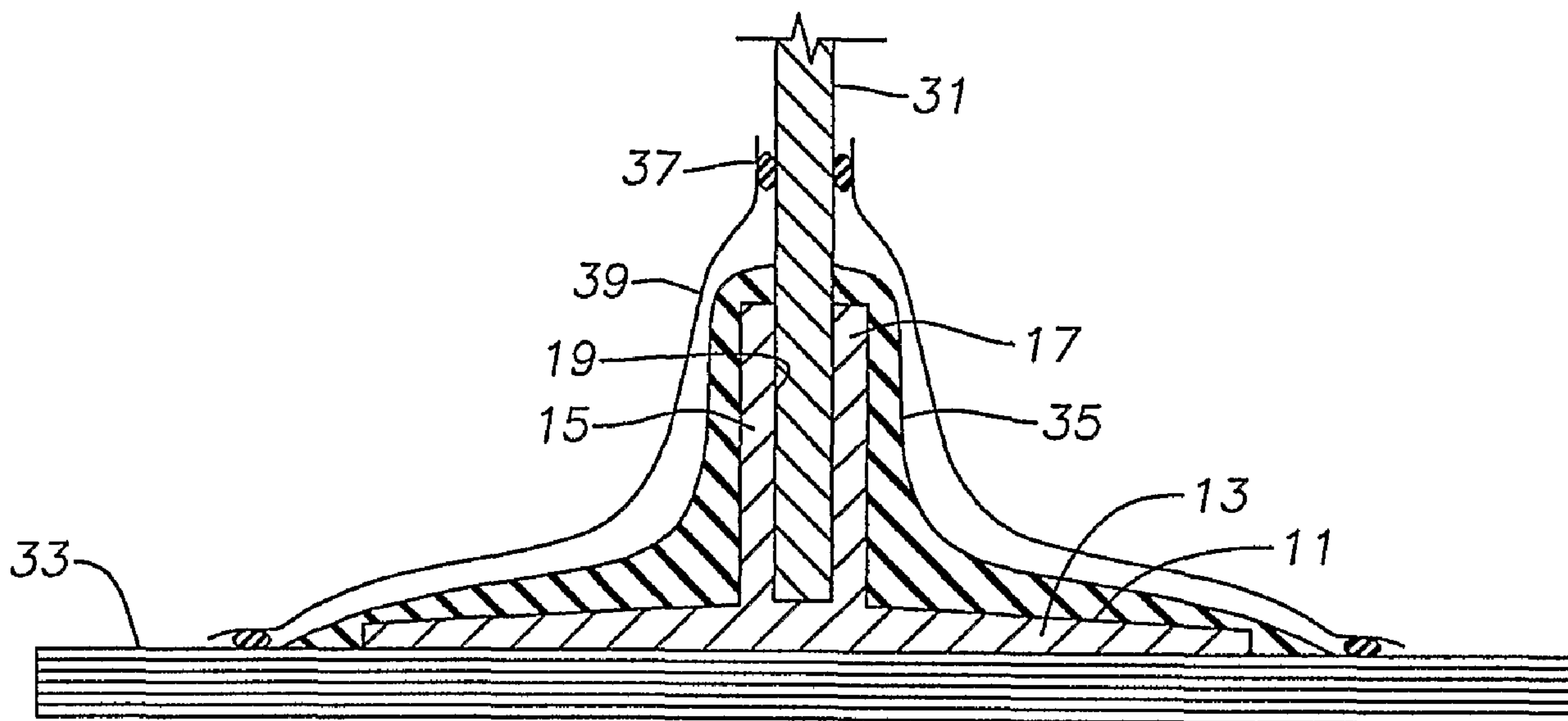




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 CONSTITUER UN ELEMENT DE SUPPORT STRUCTURAL
 (54) Title: APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR JOINING DISSIMILAR MATERIALS TO FORM A STRUCTURAL SUPPORT
 MEMBER



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

A preformed component or "preform" (11) for a structural member has a planar base with two longitudinal legs (15, 17) extending in parallel from the base (13). A channel (19) is defined between the legs (15, 17) for insertion of a flat panel (31) that forms the web of the structural member. The preform (11) is a composite material having continuous filaments of woven or braided fiber (21). The preform (11) is impregnated with a thermoset resin that bonds the web of the flange of the structural member. The preform (11) provides excellent structural support even if the web of the flange are formed from dissimilar materials such as metallic and composite. The resin is structurally reinforced with oriented fibers in such a manner as to provide coupling strength between the joined members.

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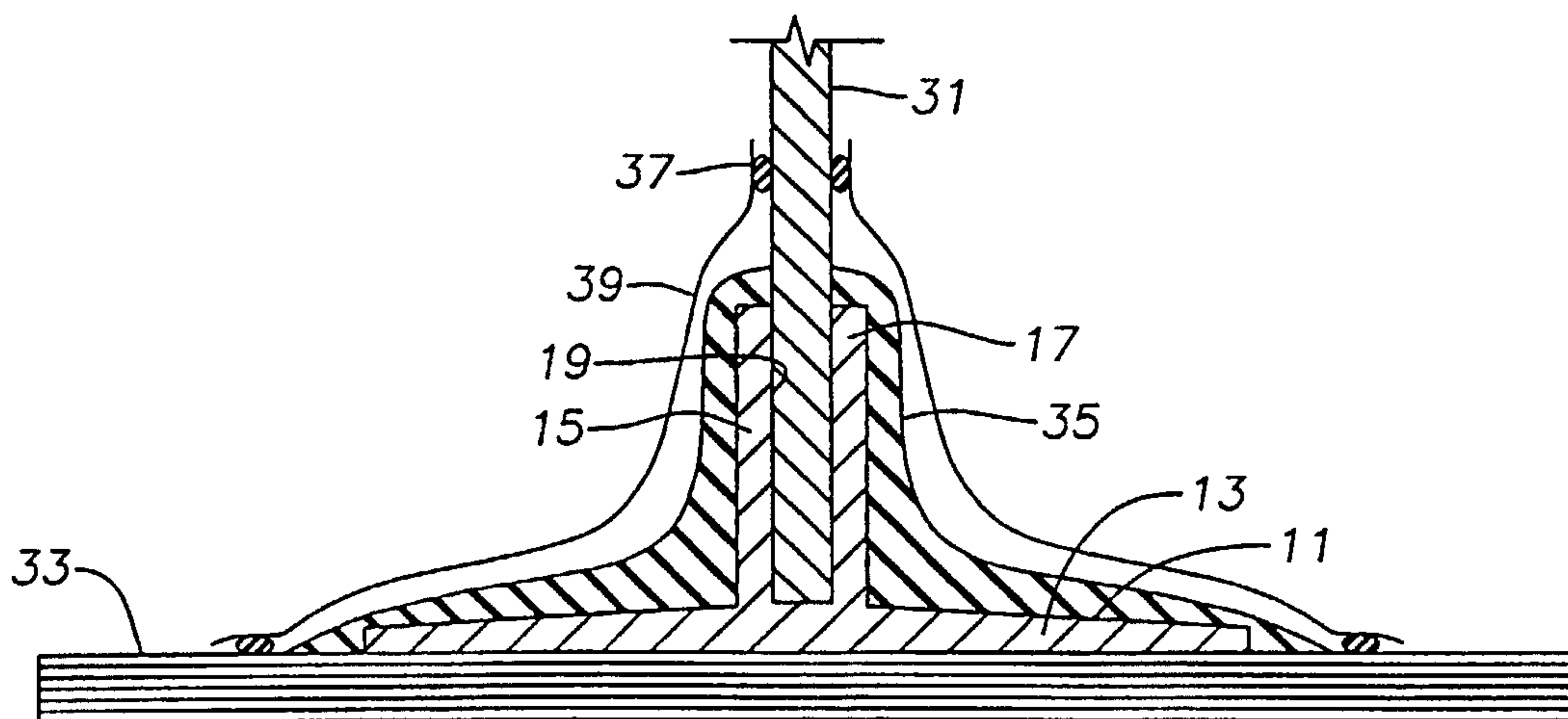
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(54) Title: APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR JOINING DISSIMILAR MATERIALS TO FORM A STRUCTURAL SUPPORT MEMBER



(57) Abstract: A preformed component or "preform" (11) for a structural member has a planar base with two longitudinal legs (15, 17) extending in parallel from the base (13). A channel (19) is defined between the legs (15, 17) for insertion of a plate panel (31) that forms the web of the structural member. The preform (11) is a composite material having continuous filaments of woven or braided fiber (21). The preform (11) is impregnated with a thermoset resin that bonds the web of the flange of the structural member. The preform (11) provides excellent structural support even if the web of the flange are formed from dissimilar materials such as metallic and composite. The resin is structurally reinforced with oriented fibers in such a manner as to provide coupling strength between the joined members.

WO 02/16784 A3

**APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR JOINING DISSIMILAR MATERIALS
TO FORM A STRUCTURAL SUPPORT MEMBER**

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Technical Field:

The present invention relates in general to an improved structural member, and in particular to an improved structural beam, made by joining dissimilar materials. Still more particularly, the present invention relates to a structural composite preform for joining the web of a structure with flanges formed from dissimilar materials.

2. Description of the Prior Art:

Structural support spars or beams may have dissimilar materials joined to each other. For example, one type of beam has a web formed from a first material (such as a metal) secured to panels formed from a second, dissimilar material (such as a composite material). This type of beam has been pursued through a variety of design and manufacturing approaches since these structures offer the potential of providing excellent stiffness and strength-to-weight performance.

1 Prior approaches to joining dissimilar materials such as metals and composites
2 have generally relied on mechanical fastening if the two elements are at an angle. As
3 shown in Figure 1, a spar 1 having an inverted T-shaped metal panel 3 with a flange 5
4 is joined to a flat composite plate 7 with mechanical fasteners 9 such that metal panel 3
5 and composite plate 7 are perpendicular to each other. In such an arrangement, metal
6 panel 3 must have flange 5 to enable fastening to composite plate 7. Moreover, the
7 necessity of having flange 5 on metal panel 3 adds considerable cost to its fabrication
8 since flange 5 significantly increases the volume of metal that must be purchased and
9 then machined away. In addition, mechanical fastening involves drilling and
10 countersinking holes, installing fasteners and, in some cases, treating the fastener heads
11 to achieve a desired surface smoothness. These steps are expensive and can contribute
12 an additional 25% to 60% to the overall cost of the spar assembly. Thus, an improved
13 apparatus and method for forming a structural support member by joining dissimilar
14 materials at an angle is needed.

15 16 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

17
18 A preformed component or "preform" for a structural support beam has a planar
19 base with two longitudinal legs extending in parallel therefrom. A channel is defined
20 between the legs of the preform, and a flat panel that forms the web of the structural
21 support beam is inserted into the channel. The preform is a composite material having
22 continuous filaments of woven or braided fiber. The preform is impregnated with a
23 thermoset resin that joins and bonds the web to the flange of the structural support beam.
24 The preform provides excellent structural support even if the web and the flange are
25 formed from dissimilar materials such as metal and composite. The resin is structurally
26 reinforced with oriented fibers in such a manner as to provide coupling strength between
27 the joined members.

28 When a single filament is chosen for the preform, its properties are selected to
29 minimize the difference in thermal expansion coefficients of the metal web and the

1 composite flange. However, the preform may have two or more types of filaments with
2 different properties. The filament in the base of the preform is chosen such that its axial
3 thermal expansion coefficient matches that of the composite flange. The filament in the
4 legs of the preform is chosen such that its axial thermal expansion coefficient matches
5 that of the metal web. These filaments are used in combination to provide coupling
6 strength between the joined metal web and composite flange by having the best structural
7 fiber oriented parallel to the legs of the preform, and by its being interwoven into the base
8 of the preform.

9 The foregoing and other objects and advantages of the present invention will be
10 apparent to those skilled in the art, in view of the following detailed description of the
11 preferred embodiment of the present invention, taken in conjunction with the appended
12 claims and the accompanying drawings.

13

14 **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

15

16 So that the manner in which the features, advantages and objects of the invention,
17 as well as others which will become apparent, are attained and can be understood in more
18 detail, more particular description of the invention briefly summarized above may be had
19 by reference to the embodiment thereof which is illustrated in the appended drawings,
20 which drawings form a part of this specification. It is to be noted, however, that the
21 drawings illustrate only a preferred embodiment of the invention and is therefore not to
22 be considered limiting of its scope as the invention may admit to other equally effective
23 embodiments.

24 **Figure 1** is an isometric view of a conventional, prior art spar formed from
25 dissimilar materials.

26 **Figure 2** is an isometric view of a structural preform constructed in accordance
27 with the invention.

28 **Figure 3** is a sectional end view of the structural preform of **Figure 2**.

1 **Figure 4 is an exploded, isometric view of the structural preform of Figure 2, a**
2 **composite flange, and a metallic web.**

3 **Figure 5 is a schematic end view of the preform, flange, and web of Figure 4**
4 **during fabrication.**

5 **Figure 6 is an exploded, isometric view of an alternate version of the structure**
6 **of Figure 4, a metallic flange, and a composite web.**

7 **Figure 7 is an end view of a beam constructed from the components of Figure**
8 **4 in accordance with the invention.**

9 **Figure 8 is an end view of an alternate embodiment of a beam constructed in**
10 **accordance with the invention.**

11

12 **DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT**

13

14 Referring to **Figures 2 and 3**, a preformed component or "preform" **11** for a
15 structural support beam is shown. When viewed from the end or in cross-section,
16 preform **11** resembles the Greek letter Π or "pi" having a longitudinal crossbar or base
17 **13** with two longitudinal legs **15, 17** extending therefrom. A groove or channel **19** is
18 defined between legs **15, 17**. Preform **11** is a composite material that is formed by
19 weaving or braiding continuous bundles or tows of structural fibers **21** (**Figure 3**). The
20 tows of fibers **21** are oriented to extend continuously throughout each segment of preform
21 **11** including base **13** and legs **15, 17**. The fiber preforms may be formed to provide any
22 desired fiber architecture needed to impart chosen load-carrying capability and to
23 accommodate any desired web panel thickness. Preform **11** may be impregnated with a
24 suitable thermoset resin that acts as an adhesive to bond together two dissimilar
25 materials. The resin is structurally reinforced with the filaments and/or fibers oriented
26 in x, y, and z directions in such a manner as to provide coupling strength between the
27 joined members.

28 Alternatively, preform **11** may be unimpregnated so that resin may be infused at
29 a later step of the overall manufacturing process. In the latter embodiment, preform **11**

1 is constructed by weaving or braiding the filaments in such a way that the process is not
2 inhibited. After curing, preform 11 may be machined as needed by an appropriate
3 method to provide desired edge straightness, smoothness, and dimensional control.

4 Referring now to **Figure 4**, preform 11 is used to join a first member, such as a
5 flat metallic panel or plate 31 to a flat composite plate or panel 33 at an angle. Metallic
6 plate 31 has a zone 32 that is prepared for bonding to preform 11. Preparation may be
7 any suitable, established method appropriate to the selected metal alloy, such as chemical
8 etching. The composite may also be prepared, in the zone to be mated with the preform,
9 by a suitable method such as removal of a peel ply. In the embodiment shown, metallic
10 panel 31 forms the web of a structural support member and composite plate 33 is
11 perpendicular. However, composite plate 33 may form the web of the spar with metallic
12 panel 31 as the other surface of the structural member, and the angle between the
13 members may be acute (see **Figure 8**). The members can be joined at other angles
14 relative to each other because the fibrous preform 11 is flexible prior to curing the resin.
15 In **Figure 8**, a beam 71 has a metallic plate 77 secured at a non-orthogonal angle between
16 upper and lower panels 73, 75. The bases 79 of the preforms 81 are substantially flat and
17 parallel relative to panels 73, 75, while the legs 83 of preforms 81 are inclined at the non-
18 orthogonal angle relative to bases 79. These concepts are not limited to I-beam type
19 structural support members, but may be readily adapted for use in beams having other
20 shapes as well, such as U-shaped, C-shaped, L-shaped, or Z-shaped beams, depending
21 on the application.

22 During assembly, one of the longitudinal edges of metallic panel 31 is fully
23 inserted into channel 19 of preform 11 until it bottoms out as shown in **Figure 5** or is
24 appropriately close to bottoming out. The two legs 15, 17 closely receive and straddle
25 the thickness of panel 31. The vertical sides or edges of panel 31 are not attached to
26 preform 11. Next, a composite plate 33 of appropriate thickness, fiber orientation, and

1 geometry is positioned against the base 13 of preform 11 opposite panel 31. Composite
2 plate 33 may be either cured or uncured, but in the preferred embodiment of the
3 invention, it is already cured to provide the desired configuration and dimensional
4 tolerances in order to simplify the assembly tooling that is required.

5 The fastenerless assembly of the metallic and composite elements also may be
6 accomplished via the following steps. (1) The base 13 of the uncured, resin-impregnated
7 preform 11 is placed at the desired joining location onto the base plate or panel (usually
8 composite plate 33) after it has been suitably cleaned or prepared for bonding. (2) Using
9 appropriate fixtures, the metallic panel 31 is placed in channel 19 of uncured preform 11
10 at the desired angle relative to composite plate 33. (3) Appropriate boundary tooling,
11 such as conventional molded shapes of silicone rubber or other suitable pressure
12 intensifier/transmitter 35 (Figure 5), is positioned against each side of preform 11. (4)
13 Vacuum bagging materials 39 are placed around the resulting assembly, sealed with
14 sealant beads 37, and a vacuum is pulled under the bag. If the preform was previously
15 unimpregnated, a selected resin is infused therein. (5) The total structure is heated
16 according to a thermal profile suitable for curing the thermosetting resin that impregnates
17 preform 11, thereby creating structural bonds that integrally link preform 11 to metallic
18 panel 31 to create a desired structure. If desired or required, autoclave pressure can be
19 simultaneously applied to provide compaction of preform 11 during cure of the resin.
20 The resin and the maximum cure temperatures are selected to provide a cured glass
21 transition temperature greater than the intended use temperature of the assembly.
22 Alternatively, a resin can be used which has a suitable chemistry, such as free-radical
23 polymerization, so that an energetic beam of electrons can initiate and complete the cure
24 (a process known in the industry as electron beam curing). (6) Following completion of
25 the required cure cycle, the bagging materials and positioning fixtures are removed,
26 yielding a completed assembly.

27 Alternatively, it should be readily apparent to one skilled in the art that all of the
28 curable materials may be uncured at the time of assembly of metallic panel 31, preforms

1 11, and composite plate 33. After the respective components are assembled and placed
2 in suitable tooling, the resin in preform 11 can be injected in a resin transfer molding type
3 of process, or infused by placing a thick layer of resin over the preform and applying a
4 vacuum bag. Although this reduces the number of cure cycles required, it significantly
5 complicates the assembly cure tooling requirements, thereby increasing both cost and
6 risk. By still another means, a co-bonding of preform 11 with an uncured composite
7 plate 33 can be accomplished. Although the process was described for only one end of
8 panel 31, this series of steps may be performed simultaneously on both ends of panel 31
9 to form the end product spar or beam 41 (Figure 7).

10 Depending upon the actual use temperature of the assembly and the chemistry of
11 the selected resin, it may be necessary to expose the assembly to resin cure temperatures
12 as high as 350 degrees F. At such temperatures, the dimensional growth of each plate or
13 panel 31, 33 is governed by its respective thermal expansion coefficient. An aluminum
14 panel 31, having an expansion coefficient of approximately 12 micro-inch/inch/degree
15 F, will expand by about 3300 micro-inch/inch of length. In contrast, a composite plate
16 33 formed from carbon fiber impregnated with epoxy resin has negligible expansion.
17 This difference in expansion imparts a significant strain on the joined panel and plate 31,
18 33, thereby degrading the mechanical performance of the assembly and making it
19 difficult to achieve the desired dimensional control of the assembly because of bowing
20 induced by the thermal mismatch. In the legs 15, 17 of preform 11, an axial fiber having
21 a thermal expansion coefficient much closer to that of aluminum panel 31 would reduce
22 the amount of strain built into the assembly by the curing operation.

23 In Figure 6, an alternate embodiment depicts a preform 51 having two (or more)
24 types of filaments and/or fibers having different properties. Base filament 53, which is
25 oriented parallel to the length of the preform, is chosen such that its axial thermal
26 expansion coefficient matches that of composite plate 33 as closely as possible. Leg
27 filament 55, which also is oriented parallel to the length of the preform, is chosen such
28 that its axial thermal expansion coefficient matches that of metallic panel 31 having
29 bonding zone 32 as closely as possible. Filaments 53, 55 are used in combination to

1 provide coupling strength to the joined metallic panel **31** and composite plate **33** by being
2 oriented parallel to the legs **57, 59** of preform **51** (in the direction of arrow **61**), and by
3 being interwoven into the base **63** of preform **51**. The fiber or filament **53** chosen to
4 provide coupling strength is oriented orthogonal to the fiber and/or filaments **55** chosen
5 for thermal expansion characteristics. These orthogonal fibers **53** traverse the width of
6 preform **51**, following its shape back and forth in a manner resulting from weaving of
7 wool fibers, i.e., those fibers which are perpendicular to the lengthwise direction of the
8 preform.

9 The extent and pattern, if any, for blending the two axial fibers **53, 55** in the area
10 where the legs **57, 59** intersect base **63** are determined on an application-specific basis
11 through analysis and/or empirical methods. When a single filament is chosen for preform
12 **51** (**Figure 4**), its properties are selected in order to minimize its difference in thermal
13 expansion coefficients with metallic panel **31** and composite plate **33**. However, in all
14 cases the filaments are oriented parallel to the axis and continuous length of the preform.

15 An example of filament or fiber selections would be E-glass® or S-glass® fibers
16 for the axial direction of preform **11**, and high strength carbon fibers such as Hexcel
17 AS4® or Toray T300® for the coupling strength direction (parallel to the vertical
18 direction of legs **15, 17**). Glass fibers provide a thermal expansion coefficient on the
19 order of 6 micro-inch/inch/degree F, whereas carbon fibers have an expansion coefficient
20 near zero. Thus, glass fibers are a better thermal strain match with aluminum than with
21 carbon fiber. Alternatively, metallic filaments in the axial direction impart a smaller
22 difference in thermal strains between the legs **15, 17** of preform **11** and metallic panel **31**.
23 High modulus carbon fibers such as Hexcel IM7® or Amoco T600M® may be used for
24 the coupling strength direction, where the total distance over which strain differences are
25 multiplied is very small.

26 During the cure of the resin, temperature is controlled so that the resin gels at as
27 low a temperature as is practical. This step is followed by a slow rise in temperature to
28 levels necessary to achieve the required glass transition temperature of the cured resin.
29 Gelling the resin at a lower temperature aids the establishment of a stress-free

1 temperature point that is lower than that required to achieve the needed glass transition
2 temperature. The rise in temperature after gellation must be very slow so that resin cross-
3 link density is increased at such a rate that increasing levels of thermally-induced strain
4 does not break down the tender bond. After completing the maximum temperature dwell,
5 cool down preferably occurs at as slow a rate as practical until a temperature is reached
6 that is at least **50** degrees F lower than the gellation temperature. This slow cool down
7 allows some relaxation to occur in the polymer and helps to preserve the lowest possible
8 stress-free temperature. The difference in stress-free temperature and ambient
9 temperature, multiplied by the difference between thermal expansion coefficient of
10 metallic panel **31** and that of the axial fibers in preform **11**, determine the amount of
11 thermally-induced strain in the resulting assembly.

12 The present invention has several advantages. Woven or braided pi-shaped
13 preforms join metallic and composite plates or panels at angles relative to each other
14 without the use of mechanical fasteners. The preforms provide much greater strength
15 than conventional adhesive bonding techniques while simplifying and reducing the cost
16 of manufacturing. The present invention does not require drilling, countersinking,
17 fastener installation, or fastener head treatments. Whereas mechanical fastening involves
18 incremental work progressing along the joint length, the present invention treats the
19 entire joint in one step. This enables a very large reduction of 20% to 55% in the total
20 cost of the assembly. In addition, the present invention is also lighter in weight than prior
21 art solutions because the resin-impregnated preform weighs less than the number of
22 fasteners that would be required to provide an equivalent strength joint. Moreover, the
23 metallic member can be a flat plate or panel without a flange, thereby significantly
24 reducing the cost of fabricating the metal detail for many complex, high performance
25 structures such as those used for aircraft.

26 While the invention has been shown or described in only some of its forms, it
27 should be apparent to those skilled in the art that it is not so limited, but is susceptible to
28 various changes without departing from the scope of the invention.

CLAIMS

1

2 **What is claimed is:**

3

4 1. A structural member, comprising:

5

6 a first member formed from one of a metallic material and a composite material,
7 the first member having a pair of longitudinal edges extending in an axial direction;

8

9 a second member formed from the other of the metallic and composite materials;

10

11 a preform formed from composite materials and having a base with a pair of
12 axially elongated legs extending therefrom to define a channel therebetween, wherein the
13 preform is formed from filaments that extend through the base and legs; and wherein

14

15 one of the longitudinal edges of the first member is bonded in the channel of the
16 preform and the second member is bonded to a surface of the base of the preform.

17

18 2. The structural member of claim 1 wherein the filaments of the preform include
19 axially oriented filaments that are selected to minimize a difference in thermal expansion
20 coefficients of the first member and the second member.

21

22 3. The structural member of claim 1 wherein the preform has a pi-shaped cross-
23 section.

24

25 4. The structural member of claim 1 wherein the axial filaments are oriented parallel
26 to an axial, continuous length of the preform.

27

28 5. The structural member of claim 1 wherein the second member and the base of the
29 preform are inclined at a non-orthogonal angle relative to the first member.

- 1 6. The structural member of claim 1 wherein the preform is impregnated with a
2 thermoset resin that acts as an adhesive to bond together the first member and the legs.
3
- 4 7. The structural member of claim 1 wherein the filaments of the preform include
5 axial filaments that are oriented parallel to an axial continuous length of the preform and
6 orthogonal filaments that are perpendicular to the axial filaments.
7
- 8 8. The structural member of claim 1 wherein the preform has a first type of axial
9 filament in the base, and a second type of axial filament in the legs.
10
- 11 9. The structural member of claim 8 wherein the first and second types of axial
12 filaments are blended in an area where the legs intersect the base.
13
- 14 10. The structural member of claim 8 wherein the first type of axial filament has an
15 axial thermal expansion coefficient that substantially matches an axial thermal expansion
16 coefficient of the second member, and wherein the second type of axial filament has an
17 axial thermal expansion coefficient that substantially matches an axial thermal expansion
18 coefficient of the first member.
19
- 20 11. A structural member, comprising:
21 a first member formed from one of a metallic material and a composite material,
22 the first member having a pair of longitudinal edges extending in an axial direction;
23 a second member formed from the other of the metallic and composite materials;
24 a generally pi-shaped preform formed from composite materials and having a base
25 with a pair of axially elongated legs extending therefrom to define a channel
26 therebetween, the preform being formed from axial filaments that extend through the base
27 and legs, wherein the axial filaments are oriented parallel to the axial direction and a
28
29

1 continuous length of the preform, and the axial filaments minimize a difference in
2 thermal expansion coefficients of the first member and the second member; and wherein
3
4 one of the longitudinal edges of the first member is bonded in the channel of the
5 preform and the second member is bonded to a surface of the base of the preform.
6

7 12. The structural member of claim 11 wherein the second member and the base of
8 the preform are inclined at a non-orthogonal angle relative to the first member.
9

10 13. The structural member of claim 11 wherein the preform is impregnated with a
11 thermoset resin that acts as an adhesive to bond together the first member and the second
12 member.
13

14 14. The structural member of claim 13 further comprising orthogonal filaments
15 extending through the base and the legs perpendicular to the axial filaments.
16

17 15. The structural member of claim 11 wherein the preform has a first type of axial
18 filament in the base, and a second type of axial filament in the legs, and wherein the first
19 and second types of axial filaments are blended in an area where the legs intersect the
20 base.
21

22 16. The structural member of claim 15 wherein the first type of axial filament has an
23 axial thermal expansion coefficient that substantially matches an axial thermal expansion
24 coefficient of the second member, and the second type of axial filament has an axial
25 thermal expansion coefficient that substantially matches an axial thermal expansion
26 coefficient of the first member.
27

28 17. A method for fabricating a structural member, comprising the steps of:

- 1 (a) providing a first member formed from one of a metallic material and a composite
2 material and having a longitudinal edge extending in an axial direction, and a second
3 member formed from the other of the metallic and composite materials;
4
- 5 (b) forming a preform from composite materials, the preform having a base with a
6 pair of legs extending therefrom to define a channel therebetween, wherein the preform
7 has filaments that extend through the base and the legs;
8
- 9 (c) positioning boundary tooling on the preform, first member, and second member
10 and heating the structural member;
11
- 12 (d) bonding the longitudinal edge of the first member in the channel of the preform
13 such that the legs of the preform closely receive the longitudinal edge of the first
14 member; and
- 15 (e) bonding the base of the preform to the second member to form a structural
16 member.
17
- 18 18. The method of claim 17 wherein steps (d) and (e) comprises heating the first
19 member, second member, and preform to create structural bonds therebetween.
20
- 21 19. The method of claim 17, further comprising the step of impregnating the preform
22 with a thermoset resin.
23
- 24 20. The method of claim 17 wherein the preform of step (b) is unimpregnated, and
25 further comprising the step of infusing or injecting the unimpregnated preform with resin.
26
- 27 21. The method of claim 17, further comprising the step of applying autoclave
28 pressure to provide compaction of the preform.

1 22. The method of claim 17, further comprising the step of curing said one of the first
2 member and the second member formed from the composite material.

3
4 23. The method of claim 17 wherein step (c) comprises placing a sealed pressure
5 intensifier over the preform inside a vacuum bag.

6
7 24. The method of claim 17, further comprising the step of inclining the first member
8 of the preform at a non-orthogonal angle relative to the second member and the base of
9 the preform.

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Fig. 1
(Prior Art)

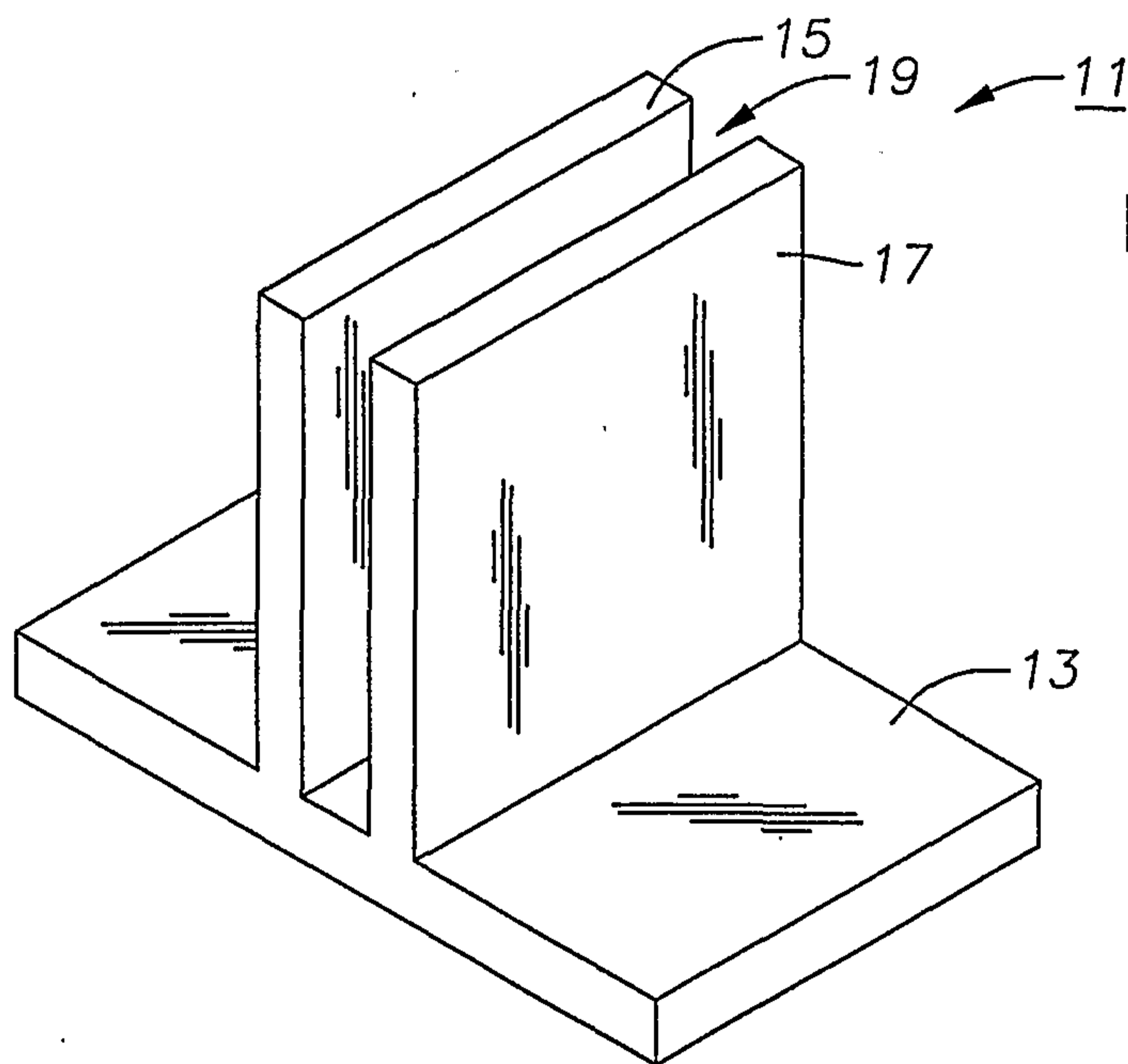
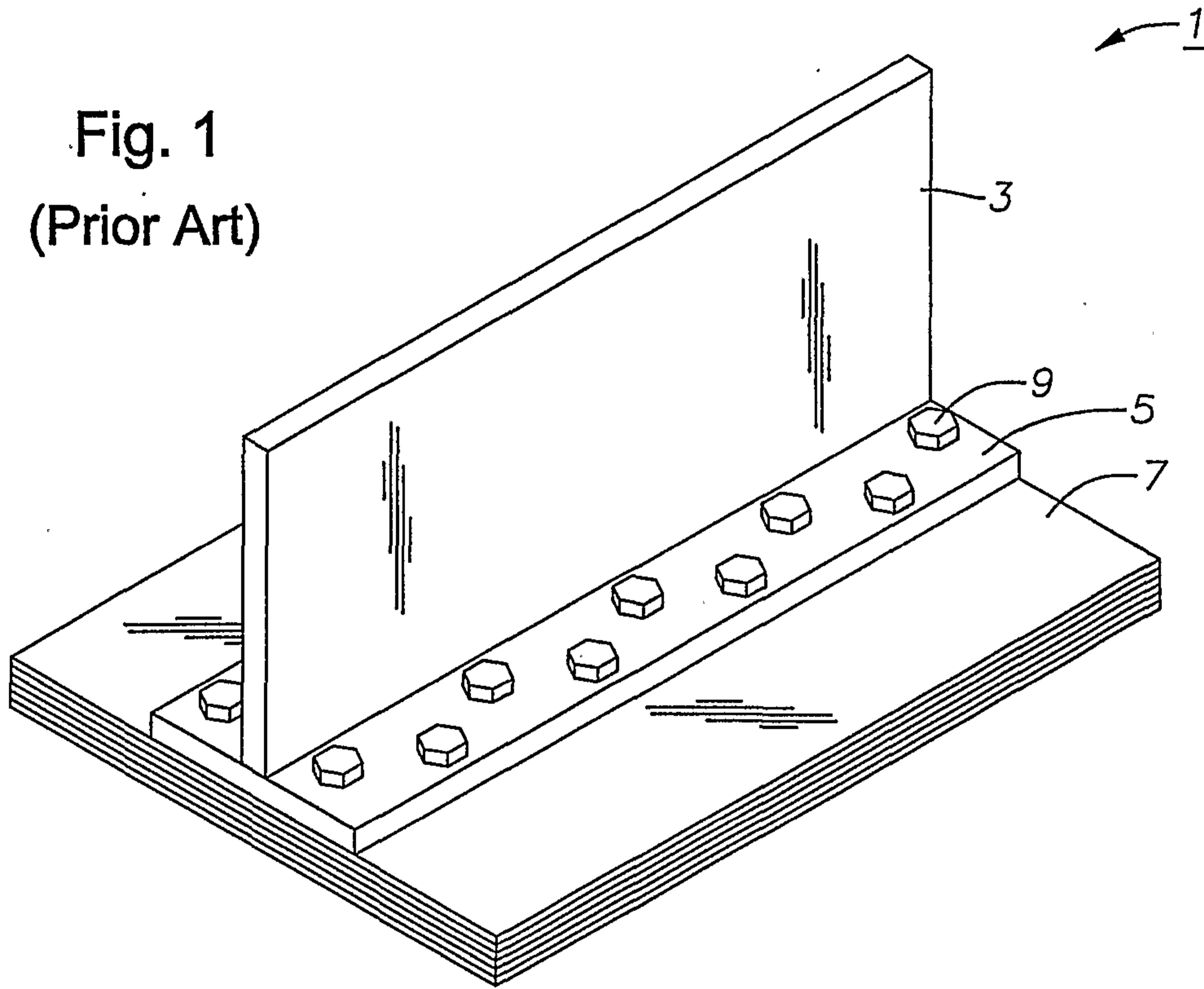


Fig. 2

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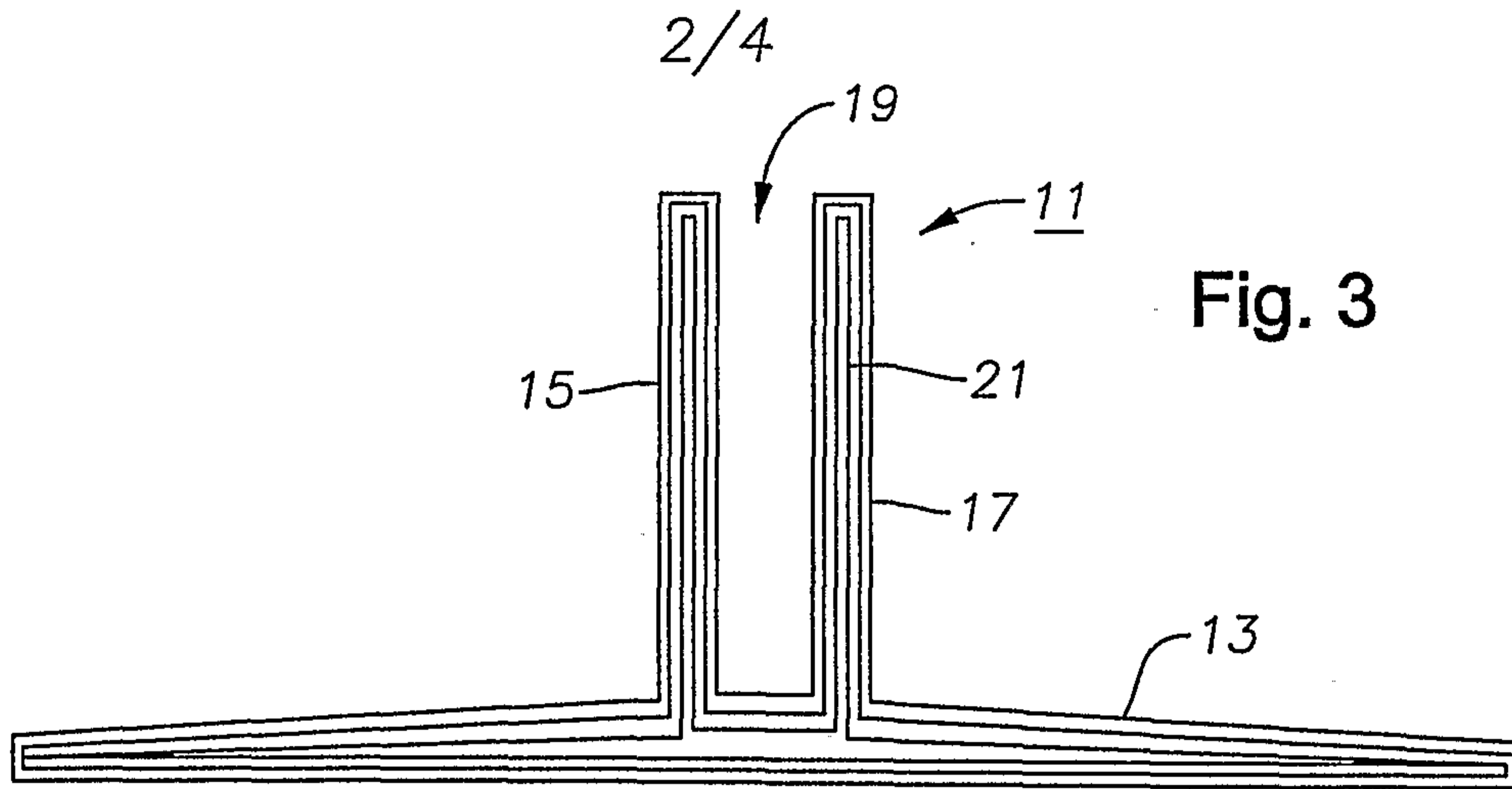
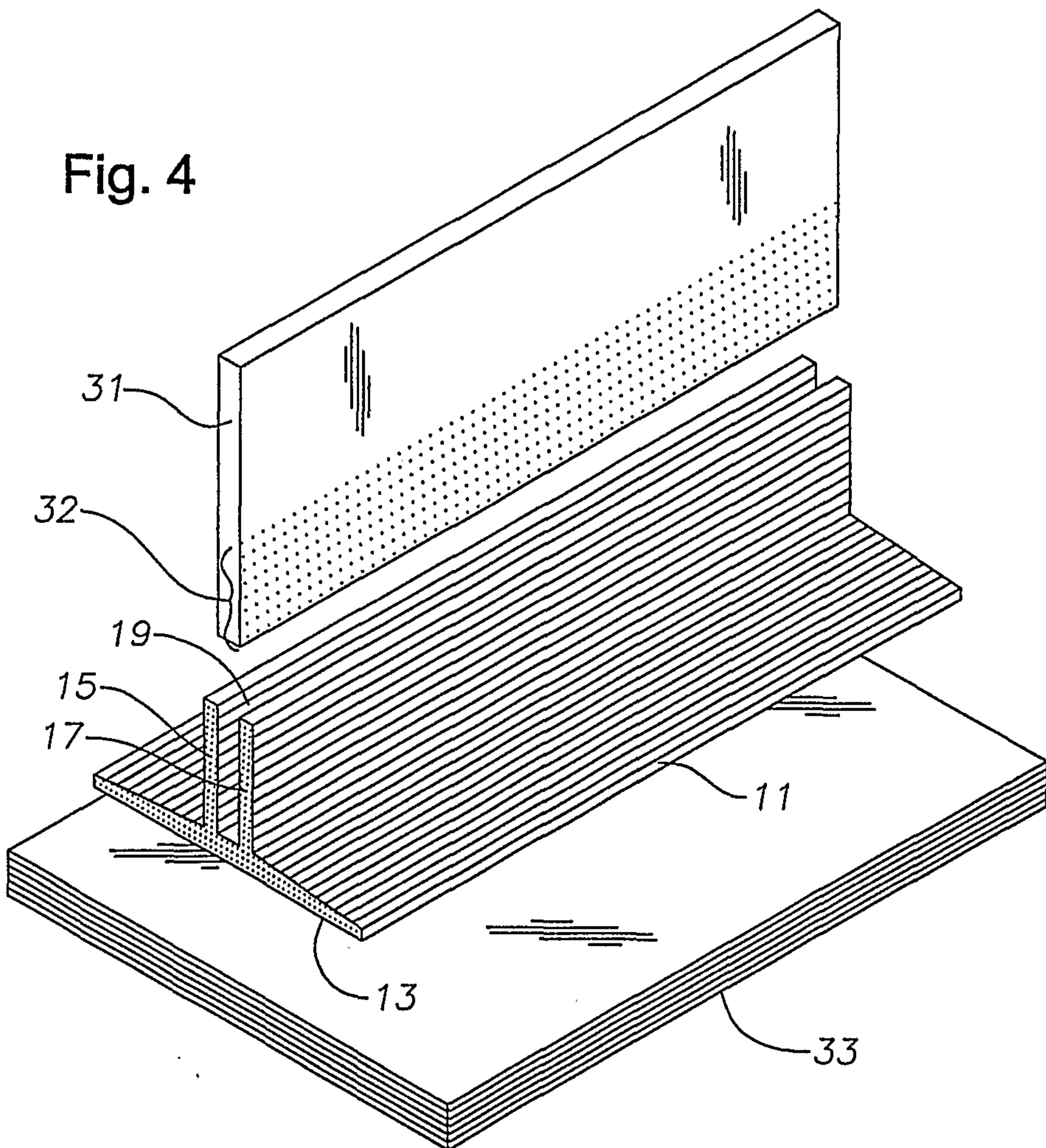


Fig. 3



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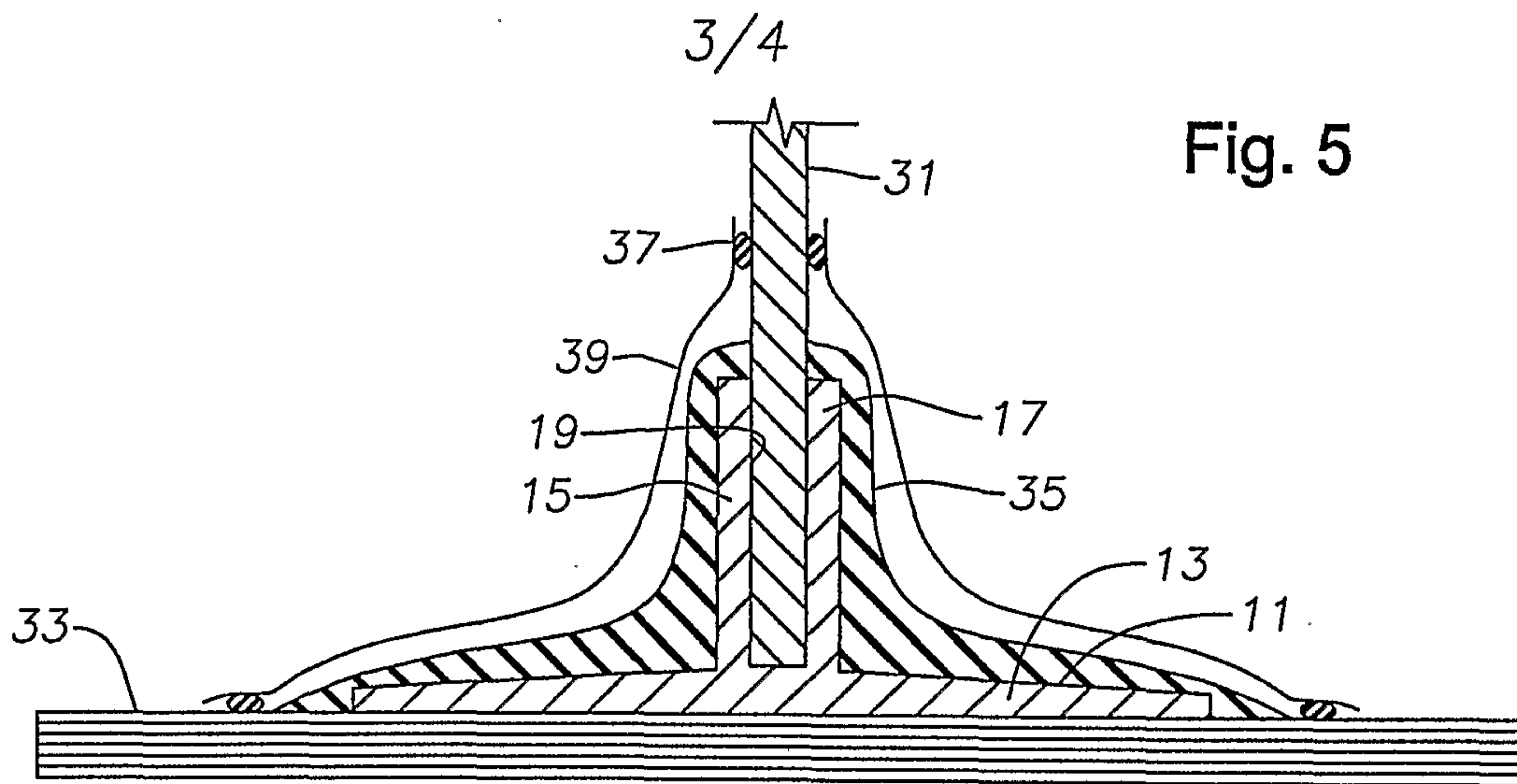


Fig. 5

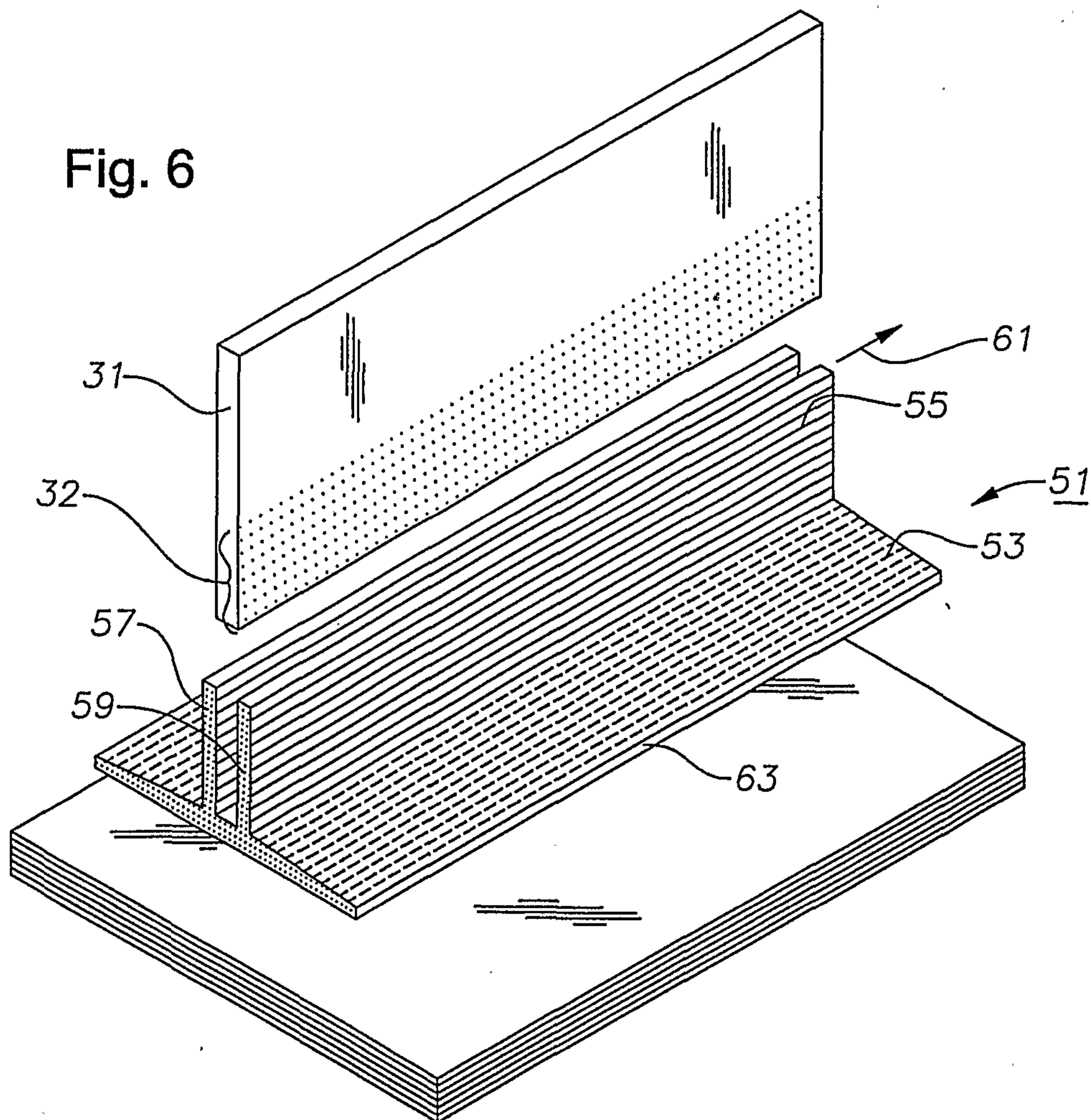


Fig. 6

TA-00439

4/4

Fig. 7

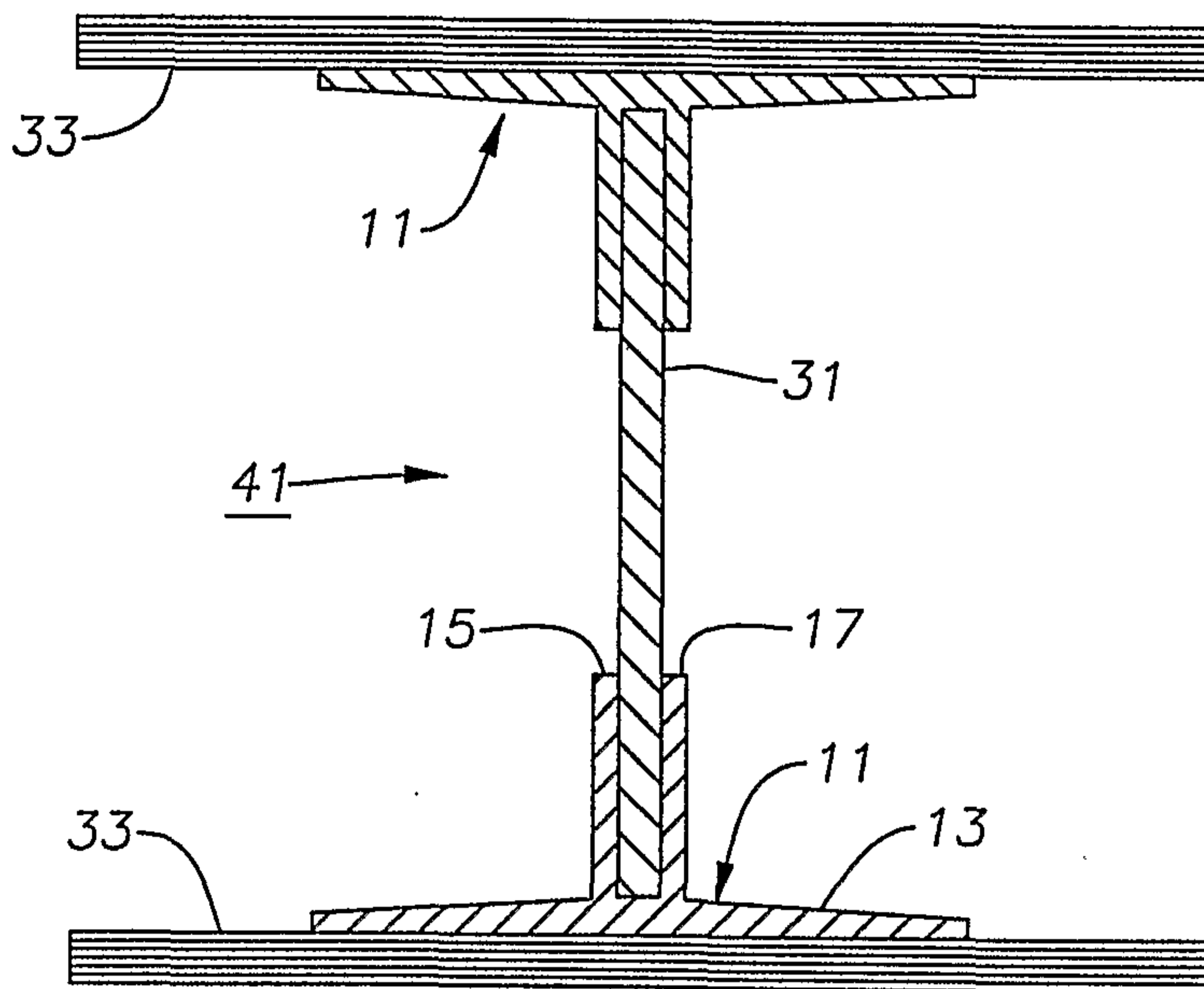


Fig. 8

