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**NUMERICAL SIMULATIONS OF EQUATORIAL SPREAD F USING ALTAIR  
INCOHERENT BACKSCATTER MEASURED ELECTRON DENSITY PROFILES  
FROM THE 17 JULY 1979 DNA KWAJALEIN CAMPAIGN**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

During the 17 July 1979 DNA PLUMEX I experiment, coordinated measurements of equatorial spread F (ESF) by radar backscatter using the ALTAIR radar, by plasma diagnostics using in situ rocket probes, and by scintillation measurements using the DNA Wideband satellite, were carried out. Prior to the rocket launches, however, ALTAIR was used to monitor the equatorial environment into which the rockets would be launched. In particular, off-perpendicular "incoherent" scans were made, giving direct profiles of electron density versus altitude, as well as coherent backscatter measurements. Using a background laminar electron density profile of this type, taken before the onset of spread F, as the ambient laminar ionospheric profile, we have performed numerical simulations of the nonlinear evolution of the collisional Rayleigh-Taylor instability. This phenomenon is believed to be the cause<sup>1-5</sup> on the large scale irregularities during ESF.

Our results indicate fully developed spread F plumes (bubbles) on time scales of approximately half an hour, using initial sinusoidal perturbations of 5% amplitude and two different horizontal wavelengths (8 km and 200 km). ALTAIR radar and ionosonde data indicate fully developed spread F approximately one hour after the aforementioned profile was taken<sup>6</sup>. The difference in times could easily be accounted for simply by assuming a smaller initial perturbation, i.e., the present measurements do not provide us with all the pertinent initial conditions prior to ESF onset. Other factors, such as significant differences between local and magnetic field line integrated Pedersen conductivities, the shorting effects of background E region conductivities, and the effect of inertial terms in the ion momentum equation (ignored in our simulations) could also delay the progress of the instability.

Manuscript submitted October 6, 1980.

Notwithstanding these effects, our aim was to show that these types of global large scale numerical simulations of the collisional Rayleigh-Taylor mechanism are consistent with the onset time and morphology of ESF during the 17 July 1979 campaign. Also, we find that the larger horizontal scale length bubbles consist of plasma which originated at much lower altitudes than that of their smaller horizontal scale length counterparts, resulting in much more depleted bubbles in the larger horizontal scale length case. This last effect is explained using scaling arguments similar to those which apply to the fringe field at the edge of a parallel plate capacitor.<sup>5</sup>

In Section II we briefly review the relevant theory and equations used in the numerical simulations; in Section III we present and analyze the numerical results; and in Section IV a summary is presented.

## II. THEORY

For a complete description of our theoretical and numerical model of the equatorial spread F phenomenon see reference 4. Briefly, we assume that the magnetic field line integrated Pedersen conductivity in the equatorial ionosphere is dominated by, and is therefore proportional to, the local (equatorial) Pedersen conductivity, which in turn is proportional to the product of the local ion-neutral collision frequency and the local electron density. This enables us to carry out our simulations in a two dimensional (x,y) coordinate system. The constant magnetic field  $\underline{B}$  is aligned along the  $\hat{z}$  axis (pointing north). Gravity is directed along the negative  $\hat{y}$  axis.  $n(y)$ ,  $\nu_R(y)$ , and  $\nu_{in}(y)$  are the ambient electron density, recombination coefficient, and ion-neutral collision frequency respectively. Magnetic field lines are assumed to terminate at both ends in an electrically

insulated medium (currents must close in the two dimensional plane, not in some distant E region).

Following reference 4, we describe the system with the two-fluid plasma continuity and momentum equations:

$$\frac{\partial n_{\alpha}}{\partial t} + \nabla \cdot (n_{\alpha} \underline{v}_{\alpha}) = - \nu_R n_{\alpha} \quad (1)$$

$$\left( \frac{\partial}{\partial t} + \underline{v}_{\alpha} \cdot \nabla \right) \underline{v}_{\alpha} = \frac{q_{\alpha}}{m_{\alpha}} \left( \underline{E} + \frac{\underline{v}_{\alpha} \times \underline{B}}{c} \right) + \underline{g} - \nu_{\alpha n} (\underline{v}_{\alpha} - \underline{U}_n) \quad (2)$$

where the subscript  $\alpha$  denotes the species (i for ions, e for electrons),  $n$  is the species number density,  $\underline{v}$  is velocity,  $\nu_R$  is the recombination coefficient,  $\underline{E}$  is the electric field,  $\underline{g}$  is the gravitational acceleration,  $q$  is the species charge,  $\nu_{\alpha n}$  is the species collision frequency with the neutral atmosphere,  $\underline{U}_n$  is the neutral wind velocity,  $c$  is the speed of light, and  $m$  is the species mass.

Note that, in contrast to reference 4, we have dropped the term  $+ \nu_R n_{\alpha 0}$  from (1). This is the equivalent of dropping the assumption of the existence of an ionization source given by that term. This ionization source was such that the ambient ionization profiles  $n_{\alpha 0}(y)$  was an equilibrium profile ( $\partial n_{\alpha 0} / \partial t = 0$ ). Our present model therefore has instead

$$\frac{\partial n_{\alpha 0}}{\partial t} = - \nu_R n_{\alpha 0} \quad (3)$$

Hence, when normalized results  $n_\alpha(x,y)/n_{\alpha 0}(y)$  are later presented, it should be understood that both the numerator and denominator are time dependent.

Figure 1 shows the recombination rate  $\nu_R$  and ion-neutral collision frequency  $\nu_{in}$  used in our simulations. It shall be seen presently that  $\nu_{en}$  need not be specified as long as it is much smaller than the electron gyro-frequency  $\Omega_e$ . For details on the form of  $\nu_{in}$  and  $\nu_R$  as depicted in Figure 1, see reference 4. If we neglect the inertial terms (the left-hand side) of (2) by assuming the inertial time scales are much larger than either the gyro-periods or the mean time between collisions, then the equation can be inverted to give an algebraic expressions for  $\underline{v}_\alpha$ . In two-dimensional (x,y) geometry with  $\underline{B}$  along the  $\hat{z}$  axis, the solution is for our problem, with  $m_e \ll m_i$ ,  $\nu_{in}/\Omega_i \ll 1$ ,  $\nu_{en}/\Omega_e = 0$  (where  $\Omega_\alpha = eB/m_\alpha c$ ), and  $\underline{U}_n = 0$ ,

$$\underline{v}_e = \frac{c}{B} \underline{E} \times \hat{z}, \quad \hat{z} = \frac{\underline{B}}{|\underline{B}|} \quad (4)$$

$$\underline{v}_i = \left( \frac{\underline{g}}{\Omega_i} + \frac{c}{B} \underline{E} \right) \times \hat{z} + \frac{\nu_{in}}{\Omega_i} \left( \frac{\underline{g}}{\Omega_i} + \frac{c}{B} \underline{E} \right) \quad (5)$$

We now make the electrostatic approximate,

$$\underline{E} = \nabla_\perp \phi \quad (6)$$

where  $\nabla_\perp \equiv \hat{x}(\partial/\partial x) + \hat{y}(\partial/\partial y)$ , and the quasi-neutrality approximation

$n_e \approx n_i \equiv n$ . We then have

$$\nabla_\perp \cdot \underline{j} = 0 \quad (7)$$

$$\underline{j} \equiv en (\underline{v}_i - \underline{v}_e) \quad (8)$$

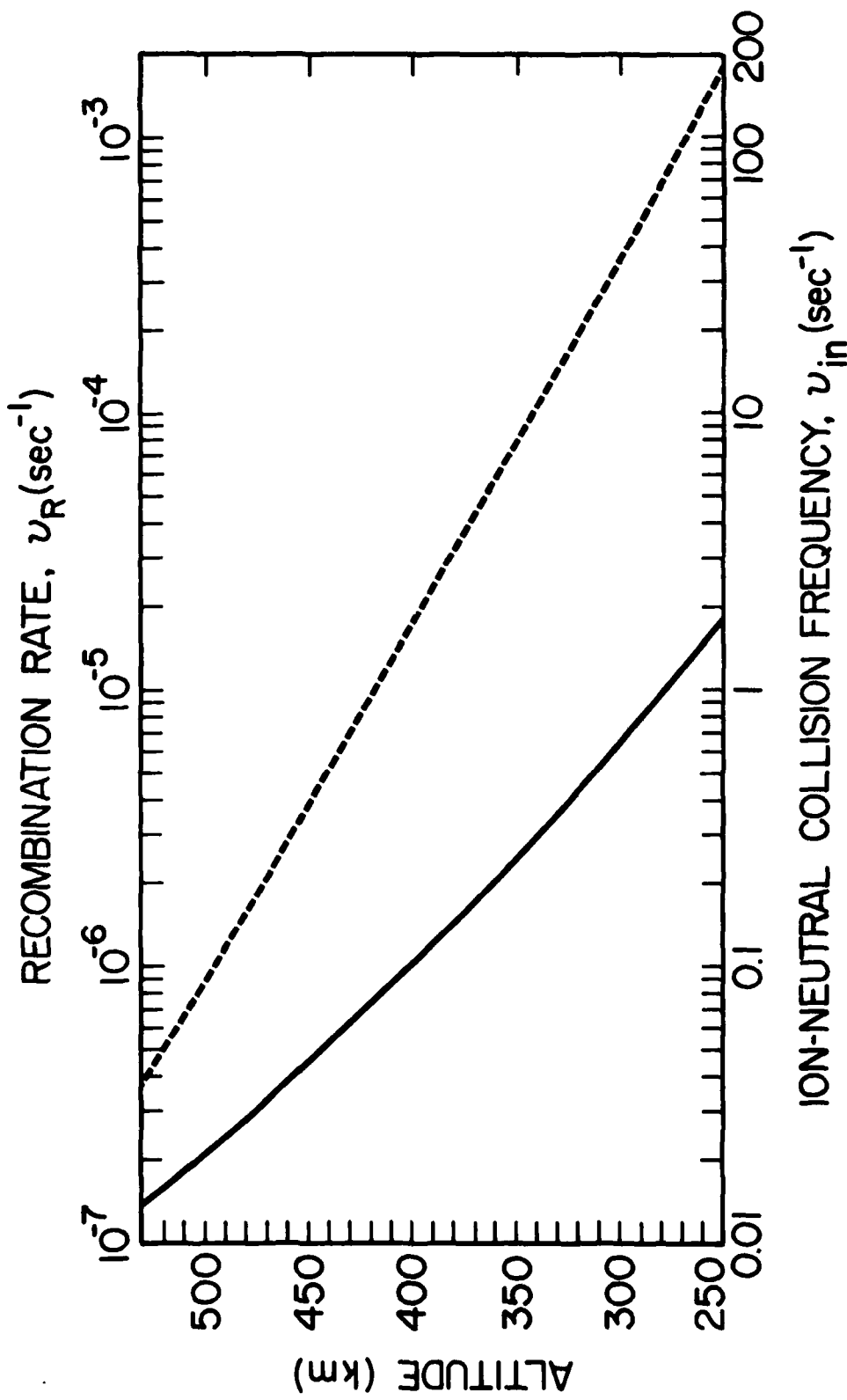


Fig. 1 - Ion-neutral collision frequency (solid line)  $\nu_{in}$  and recombination coefficient (rate)  $\nu_R$  as a function of altitude

Substituting (4) and (5) into (8) and evaluating (7), we have for the electrostatic potential:

$$\nabla_{\perp} \cdot (v_{in} n \nabla_{\perp} \phi) = - \frac{m_i}{e} g \frac{\partial}{\partial y} (v_{in} n) - \frac{B}{c} g \frac{\partial n}{\partial x} \quad (9)$$

As in reference 4 we set  $\phi = \phi_0 + \phi_1$  where  $\nabla_{\perp} \phi_0 = - (m_i g / e) \hat{y}$ . Since  $\nabla_{\perp}^2 \phi_0 = 0$ , our final potential equation becomes

$$\nabla_{\perp} \cdot (v_{in} n \nabla_{\perp} \phi_1) = - \frac{Bg}{c} \frac{\partial n}{\partial x} \quad (10)$$

The effect of  $\phi_0$  is merely to superimpose a bulk westward plasma velocity  $g/\Omega_i$  on the electron velocity field determined from  $\phi_1$ , without affecting the morphology of the developing structures. Hence, we ignore this motion. In addition, we have ignored any upward or downward bulk motion of the ionospheric plasma, i.e., any ambient eastward or westward electric field. This is done because we have chosen a starting time for our simulation, which while prior to ESF onset, which coincides<sup>6</sup> with essentially no upward or downward bulk motion of the ionospheric plasma.

Our assumption of quasi-neutrality has made one of our two continuity equations (1) redundant. We therefore choose the electron equation for its simplicity:

$$\frac{\partial n}{\partial t} - \frac{\partial}{\partial x} \left( \frac{nc}{B} \frac{\partial \phi_1}{\partial y} \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial y} \left( \frac{nc}{B} \frac{\partial \phi_1}{\partial x} \right) = - v_R n \quad (11)$$

### III. NUMERICAL SIMULATION RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Equations (10) and (11), together with appropriate boundary conditions, constitute the nonlinear system of equations we shall solve numerically. The numerical calculations to be presented were performed on a two-dimensional cartesian (x,y) mesh using 42 points in the x (east-west) direction, and 142 points in the y (vertical) direction. The (uniform) grid spacing was 2 km in the y direction for all calculations. The grid spacing in the x

direction was 200m in the "small" horizontal scale length cases and 5 km in the "large" cases. The bottom of the grid corresponds to 282 km altitude and the top of the grid to 564 km altitude in all simulations. Periodic boundary conditions were imposed on both  $n$  and  $\phi_1$  in the x-direction. In the y direction transmissive boundary conditions were imposed on  $n(\partial n/\partial y = 0)$  and Neumann ( $\partial\phi_1/\partial y = 0$ ) boundary conditions were imposed on  $\phi_1$ .

Three kinds of plots will be presented: (1) contours of constant  $n(x,y,t)$ ; (2) contours of constant  $n(x,y,t)/n_0(y,t)$ ; and (3) contours of constant electrostatic potential  $\phi_1$ . Superimposed on each contour plot is a dashed line depicting  $n_0(y,t)$  for reference purposes. Our initial electron density profile  $n_0(y,0)$  is taken from data supplied to us by Tsunoda<sup>7</sup>. It is derived from an off-perpendicular VHF ALTAIR scan taken at 08:04 UT on 17 July 1979. We found it necessary to introduce some smoothing of the raw data using a standard Shuman filter in order to eliminate spurious regions of stability and instability in the initial profile. In general, the bottomside gradient scale lengths associated with this profile are quite a bit larger than those we have used in previous simulations.<sup>4,5</sup> This factor by itself would tend to give us smaller linear growth rates for the collisional Rayleigh-Taylor instability. However, this decrease in linear growth rate is offset by the fact that the whole ionosphere is somewhat higher (this effect tends to increase the linear growth rate) than that used in our previous work (see reference 4 for details). However, the higher altitude of the ionosphere will not offset one other effect of the large initial gradient scale lengths, viz., displacing a plasma fluid element vertically a given distance will result in a smaller relative depletion level. Thus, all other things being equal, larger gradient scale lengths in the initial electron

density profile will produce less depleted bubbles. To summarize, we expect approximately equal growth times, but less depleted bubbles, than we have seen in our previous work.

Our initial perturbation is given by a pure sine wave of wavelength  $40 \Delta x$  (our system length in the x direction):

$$\frac{n(x,y,0)}{n_0(y,0)} = 1 - e^{-3} \cos\left(\frac{\pi x}{20\Delta x}\right) \quad (12)$$

Two simulations have been run: i) S, with  $\Delta x = 200\text{m}$ ; and ii) L, with  $\Delta x = 5 \text{ km}$ . These two cases are meant to span the range of actual observed horizontal scale lengths. Figure 2 shows isodensity contours of calculation S at six times during the simulation. Figure 3 shows the same contours at six different times for calculation L. The presence of lower density plasma in the bubble in calculation L is obvious. Also obvious is the fact that calculation S seems to proceed in two separate stages, with a small, low depletion level bubble going through the F2 peak at about 1200 seconds, followed by the main, somewhat more depleted, bubble 800 seconds later. This is in contrast to calculation L where plasma from much lower altitudes is drawn up into the bubble in one stage. Note that in both cases we have fully developed plumes (bubbles) in 2000 seconds.

Late time contours of relative electron density  $n(x,y,t)/n_0(y,t)$  are shown for calculations S and L in Figures 4a and 4b respectively. Solid lines define depleted regions, while dashed lines define enhancements. For depletions, the contour levels are such that for the first (outermost) contour  $n/n_0$  is 0.5, and for each succeeding contour  $n/n_0$  is multiplied by 0.5. Thus, the third solid contour line represents a value of  $n/n_0$  equal to

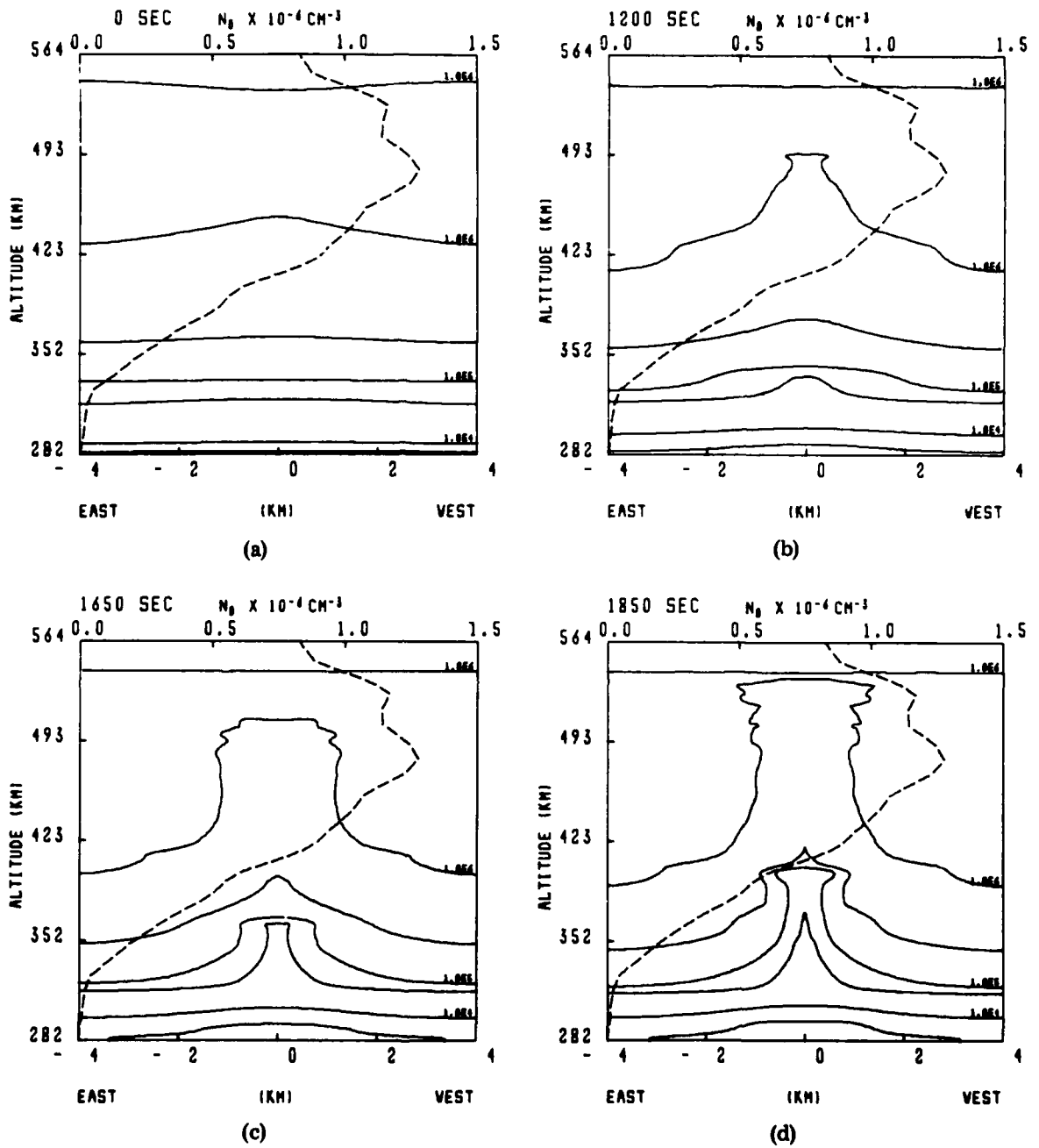


Fig. 2 — Sequence of six plots showing iso-electron density contours of calculation S at 0, 1200, 1650, 1850, 1950, and 2050 sec. Superimposed on each plot is a long dashed line depicting  $n_0(y,t)$ . Electron densities are given in  $\text{cm}^{-3}$ . The observer is looking southward.

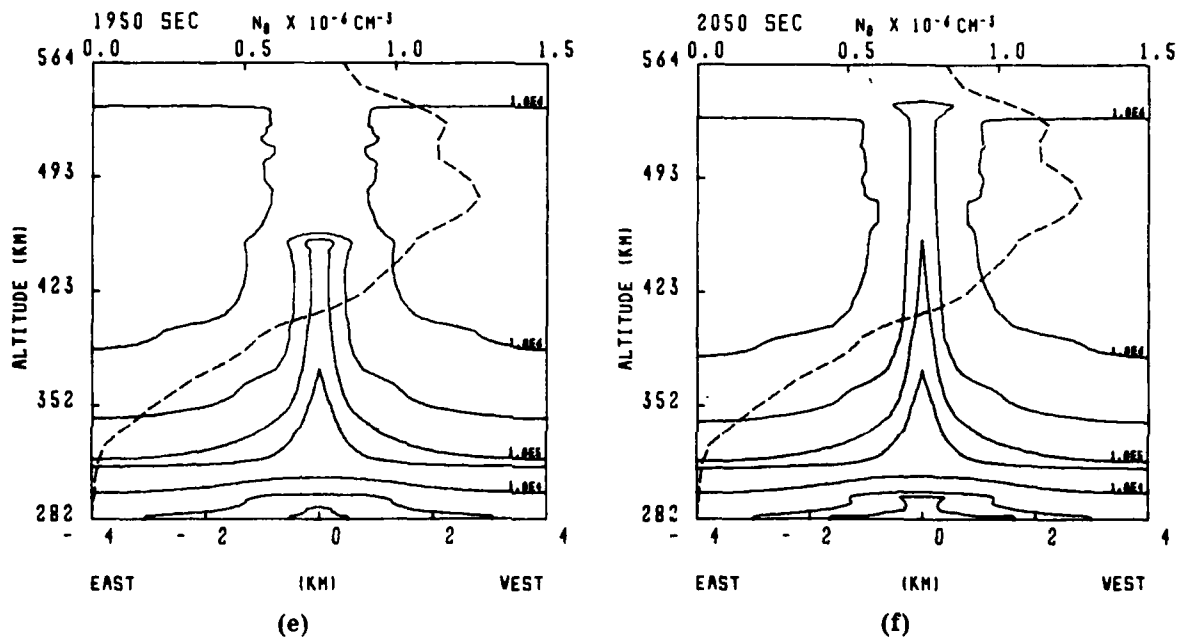
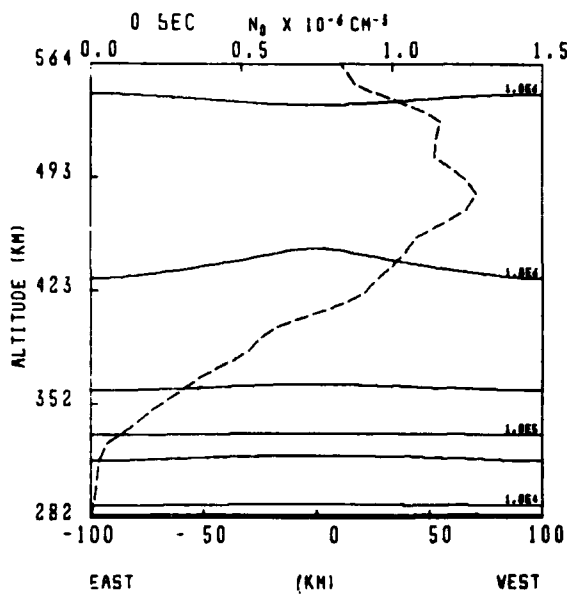
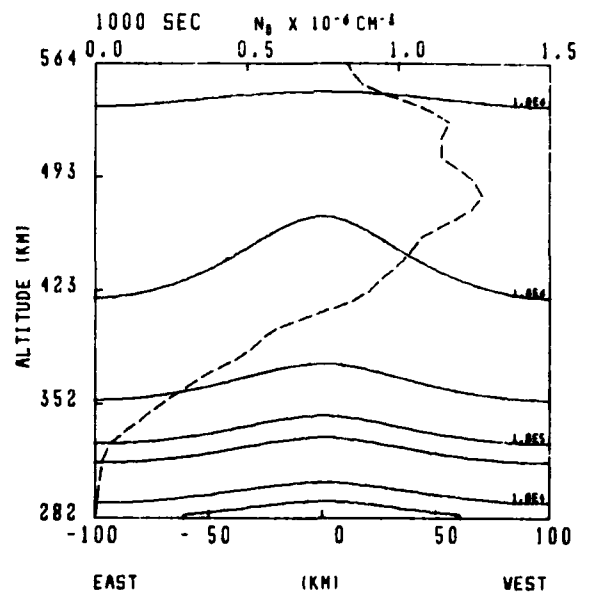


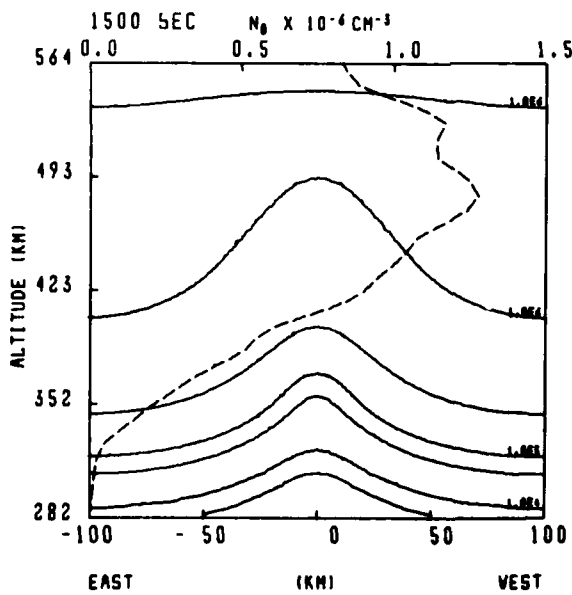
Fig. 2(Cont'd) — Sequence of six plots showing iso-electron density contours of calculation S at 0, 1200, 1650, 1850, 1950, and 2050 sec. Superimposed on each plot is a long dashed line depicting  $n_0(y,t)$ . Electron densities are given in  $\text{cm}^{-3}$ . The observer is looking southward.



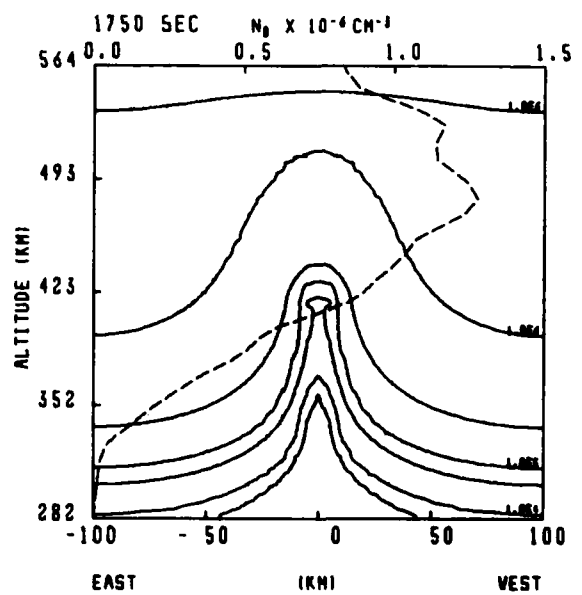
(a)



(b)

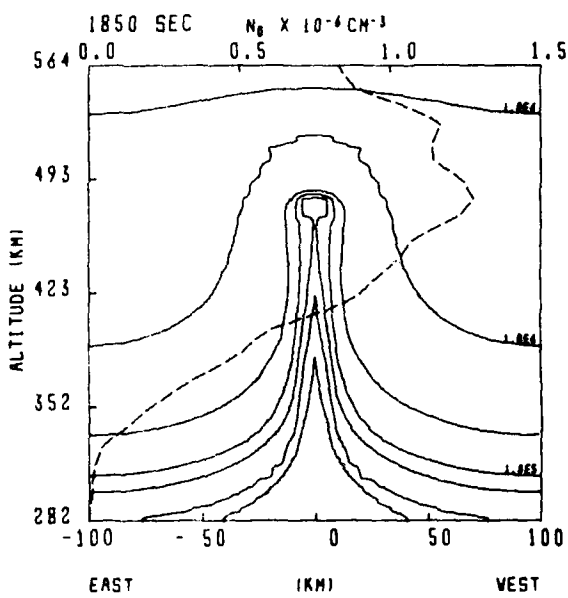


(c)

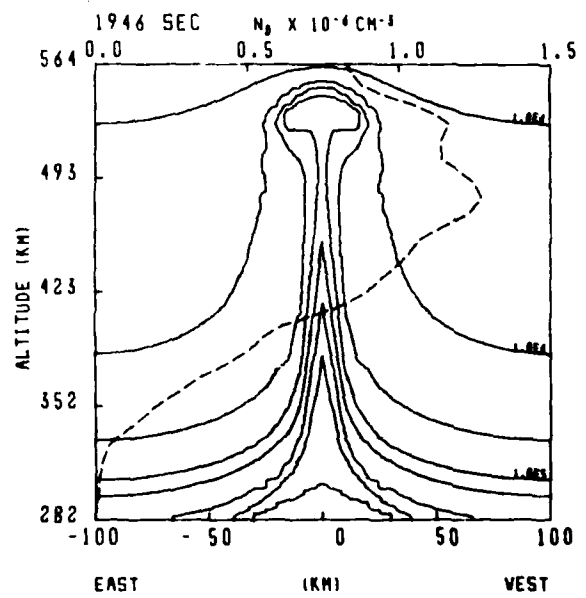


(d)

Fig. 3 — Sequence of six plots showing iso-electron density contours of calculation L at 0, 1000, 1500, 1750, 1850, and 1946 sec. Superimposed on each plot is a long dashed line depicting  $n_0(y,t)$ . Electron densities are given in  $\text{cm}^{-3}$ . The observer is looking southward.



(e)



(f)

Fig. 3(Cont'd) — Sequence of six plots showing iso-electron density contours of calculation L at 0, 1000, 1500, 1750, 1850, and 1946 sec. Superimposed on each plot is a long dashed line depicting  $n_o(y,t)$ . Electron densities are given in  $\text{cm}^{-3}$ . The observer is looking southward.

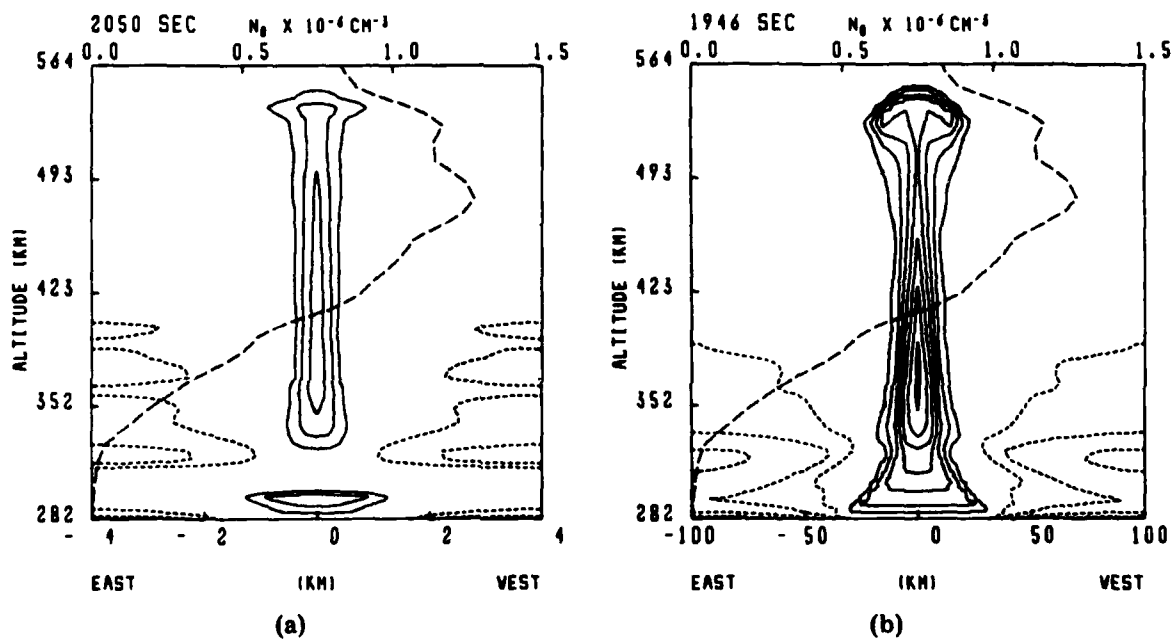


Fig. 4 - Contours of constant  $n(x,y,t)/n_0(y,t)$  for a) calculation S at 2050 sec and b) calculation L at 1946 sec. Depletions ( $n/n_0 < 1$ ) are shown as solid lines while enhancements ( $n/n_0 > 1$ ) are shown as short dashed lines. The first (outermost) depletion contour is for  $n/n_0 = 0.5$ , while each succeeding contour is for a value of  $n/n_0$  a factor of 0.5 times the previous one. The first enhancement contour is for  $n/n_0 = 2.0$ , while each succeeding contour is for a value of  $n/n_0$  a factor of 2.0 times the previous one. The superimposed long dashed line depicts  $n_0(y,t)$ .

$(0.5)^3 = 0.125$ , or an 87.5% depletion. For the first dashed contour line,  $n/n_0$  is 2.0, and for each succeeding contour line  $n/n_0$  is multiplied by 2.0. Percentage enhancements and depletions are obtained by subtracting 1.0 from  $n/n_0$ . Comparison of figures 4a and 4b shows that the depletion level of the large horizontal scale bubble is greater than that of the small horizontal scale bubble. Furthermore, neither of these calculations attain the depletion levels seen in our previous work (see Figure 7 in reference 5). For instance, in the calculation shown in Figure 7b of reference 5, which is identical to our calculation L except for the initial ambient electron density profile, a plume of almost 200 km vertical extent can be found with depletion levels of 99.9% or greater. A look at Figure 4b shows that a plume of similar dimensions can be found only for depletion levels of 94% or greater. These smaller depletion levels for the ALTAIR profile were expected based on our analysis of the effects of larger gradient scale lengths in the initial electron density profile, presented earlier in this section. An explanation of why larger horizontal scale lengths produce more severely depleted bubbles is given in reference 5. Briefly, scale analysis is invoked to show that the vertical extent of the polarization electric field produced by a perturbation in the ionosphere scales as the horizontal extent of that perturbation. Since it is the electric field which produces plasma movement, the vertical extent of the polarization electric field will determine the depth in the ionosphere from which a bubble may draw plasma. The lower in altitude that a plasma fluid element originates, the lower its density and hence the higher the depletion level of any plume into which it is drawn (see reference 5 for details). To illustrate this point, we show in Figures 5a and 5b contours of the polarization potential  $\phi_1$ , for calculation S at 1650 seconds and for

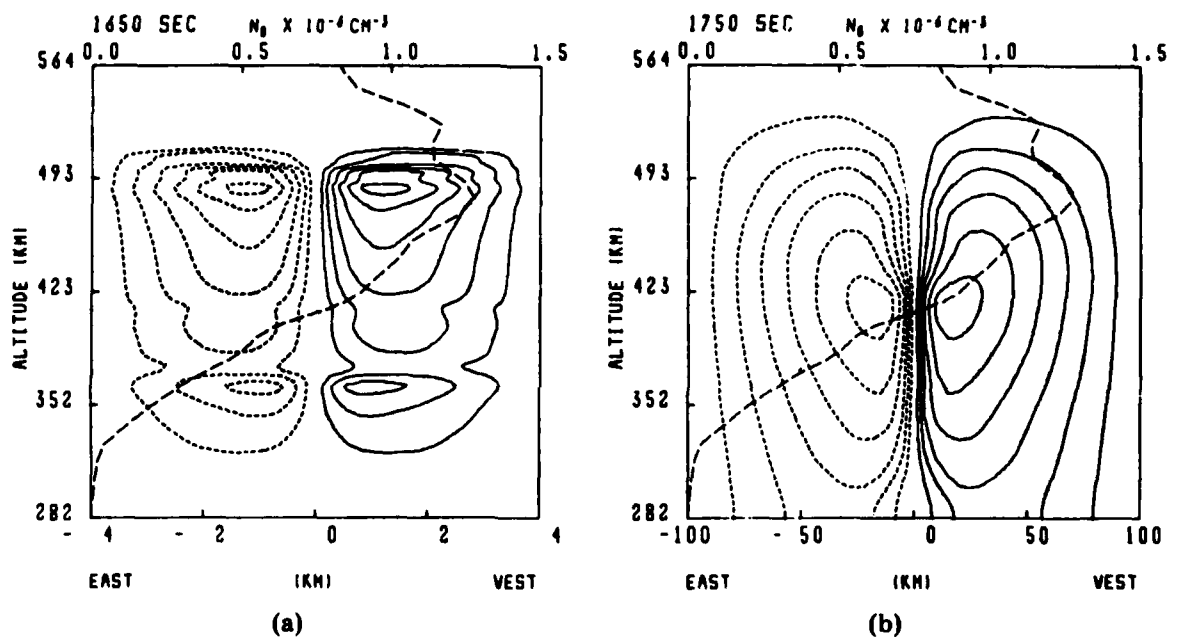


Fig. 5 — Contours of constant electrostatic potential  $\phi_1$  for a) calculation S at 1650 sec. and b) calculation L at 1750 sec. Positive potentials are shown as solid lines, while negative potentials are shown as short dashed lines. The contour levels are equally spaced from minimum to maximum, except that the zero contour is suppressed. Superimposed on each plot is a long dashed line depicting  $n_0(y,t)$ .

calculation L at 1750 seconds, respectively. Contours of constant  $\phi_1$  are in fact streamlines for this flow (see (4) and (6)). Calculation S is seen to consist of two convective cells, each mixing plasma over a fairly narrow altitude range, while calculation L has formed a deep convective cell, drawing plasma into the plume from very low altitudes.

#### IV. SUMMARY

Both of our global large scale collisional Rayleigh-Taylor nonlinear simulations, using a background electron density profile from ALTAIR incoherent radar measurements on 17 July 1979 prior to spread F onset, indicate fully developed ESF bubbles in approximately one-half hour. ALTAIR radar and ionosonde measurements indicate fully developed spread F backscatter about one hour after the profile was taken. The most obvious explanation is that perhaps we have simply chosen our perturbation amplitude too large; however, since no in situ measurements were made prior to ESF the measurements do not provide us with all the pertinent initial conditions prior to ESF onset. Other factors such as the shorting effects of background E region conductivities or the neglect of inertial terms in the ion momentum equation could also influence the speed with which the instability proceeds. In addition, since the chain of events which leads from kilometer scale bubbles to one meter backscatter irregularities is not well understood, neither are the associated time delays. Nevertheless, our simulations exhibit results which are consistent with the onset time of ESF during the 17 July 1979 Kwajalein campaign.

A word of caution is in order here with regard to a comparison of the bubbles we show in our simulations and the actual structures into which the PLUMEX I rocket was launched<sup>8,9</sup> at 12:31 UT on 17 July 1979. According to ALTAIR measurements<sup>6</sup>, starting with the onset of spread F at about 09:00 UT

and lasting until approximately the time of rocket launch, the bottomside of the F region moved downward approximately 140 km at the same time developing much smaller gradient scale lengths<sup>9</sup> than we have used in the present simulation. In addition, the bubbles detected by the in situ plasma probe at these later times shows depletions  $\lesssim 90\%$ . At least three factors are in competition here: 1) the downward movement of the ionospheric plasma indicates the presence of an electric field which would tend to reduce the growth rate of the instability; 2) lower altitudes mean larger  $v_{in}$  which again would reduce the growth rate; and 3) the development of smaller bottomside gradient scale lengths would enhance the growth rate. In addition, the ALTAIR radar operating in the coherent mode showed that VHF plumes (looking at 1m field aligned irregularities) at this late time during ESF were in a decay phase of development. Decaying plumes which had been generated early while the ionosphere was high would not disappear simply because the plasma had been displaced downward later in the evening. Obviously the actual physical situation at the rocket launch time is more complex than that addressed by the simulations presented here, although many of these complexities will be treated accurately in forthcoming versions of our simulation model.

#### Acknowledgments

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