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A new rapid thermographic method to assess the fatigue limit in GFRP composites

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Abstract

Conventional procedures and methods used for obtaining the fatigue performance of materials represent a critical aspect of mechanical characterization because of time consuming tests with a high number of specimens. In the last few years, great efforts have been made to develop a number of methods aimed at reducing testing time and, subsequently, the cost of the experimental campaign. In the process, thermographic methods have shown to be a useful tool for the rapid evaluation of fatigue damage and fatigue limit.

This work deals with a new procedure for the evaluation of fatigue limit and the monitoring of damage in GFRP material by means of thermography. Although damage mechanisms in composite materials are difficult to understand, the proposed procedure allows us to obtain a number of parameters providing information relating to the onset of failure phenomena. It is worth noting that the reported procedure provides results in good agreement with those attained by the standard test methods.

Keywords: GFRP composites, thermography, TSA, fatigue damage, fatigue limit

1. Introduction

Composite materials are nowadays used to produce large structures in many applications ranging from boating-yachting to aeronautical or aerospace [1]. In this regard, wind turbine blades are made from polymer composites since a highly specific rigidity is required, in addition to strength and good mechanical behaviour [2]. In particular, the fatigue performances imposed by Standards have to be verified by means of experimental campaigns in laboratory on sample specimens or directly on large components. Classical procedures for evaluating the fatigue limit of material involves expensive and time-consuming tests because of the high number of specimens being tested [3].

In recent years, with an aim to reduce testing times and costs of fatigue tests, different techniques and methods have been proposed in order to study the various damage phenomena rapidly and consistently [4-7]. In particular, Infrared Thermography Technique (IRT) represents a reliable support for investigating fatigue damage in metallic and composite materials [8-10]. The great interest in IRT is due to the possibility it provides for the assessment of information about fatigue behaviour by studying the heat sources generated during tests [11-15].

Luong [16] and Risitano [17] proposed a graphical method to assess the fatigue limit of metallic materials by monitoring the superficial temperature of the specimen during an incremental stepwise procedure. The same approach has been employed in Montesano's work [11] for determining the fatigue limit of polymer matrix composites (PMC). In this case, the lifespan curve has been determined by means of IRT and an excellent correlation with the conventional stress-life curve was obtained. Two different approaches (passive and active) have been applied in the work of Steinberger et al [12]. In particular, a quantitative characterization of damage has been performed by calculation of the loss factor via hysteretic heating.

In another approach, different authors [18], [19] use a specific data processing of recorded infrared sequences to investigate the damage phenomena in the material. In this case, the temperature signal

is analyzed in the time domain so that the first and the second order harmonics of the signal can be used to describe the nonlinear thermal signal component, due to the thermomechanical coupling phenomena. This approach has been used in the work of Kordatos et al. [20] to study the fatigue behaviour of aluminum grade 1050 H16 and SiC/BMAS ceramic matrix composite cross-ply specimens by combining lock-in thermography (dissipative heat source analysis) and acoustic emission techniques. In this case, as well, IRT provides a good estimation of the material life in the finite life region.

In other works [21-24], the potential to identify minimal damage by means of Thermoelastic stress Analysis (TSA) has been demonstrated.

Thermoelastic Stress Analysis (TSA) is a non-contact, full field technique that provides stress maps of a component subjected to dynamic loading [21-24]. This technique is based on the thermoelastic effect: a component undergoing dynamic load exhibits a small and reversible temperature change. In adiabatic and linear elastic conditions, these temperature changes are proportional to the first stress invariant. Procedures based on TSA have been developed in the last few years for the damage monitoring of standard specimens and welded joints made of metallic materials (steel, titanium and aluminum) [25], [26].

The potential of TSA for analyzing composite materials has been reported in the works of Emery et al. [13] and Fruehmann et al. [14]. In particular, the first investigates various polymer-matrix-composites with different laminate types, while the second highlights the possibility of using the phase signal for evaluation of fatigue damage, even at low stress.

In this work, a novel procedure for processing thermographic data is shown which can illustrate the fatigue behaviour of GFRP composites and provides a rapid evaluation of the fatigue limit of material. The strong point of the proposed method is the possibility to obtain with a single analysis of thermographic data, information about dissipative heat sources and thermoelastic heat sources. This analysis has been applied for several fatigue tests on five standard specimens made of GFRP composite material. Each test has been monitored at regular intervals with a cooled infrared camera.

Finally, conventional fatigue tests were also performed in order to offer a comparison with the proposed thermal procedure.

2. Theory

Generally, during fatigue tests, two thermal effects are generated: thermoelastic heat sources and intrinsic dissipations. The first represents the well-known thermoelastic coupling while, intrinsic dissipation is thermodynamically irreversible and is due to various factors including the viscoelastic nature of the matrix material, matrix cracking, fibre fracture, and interface cracking /friction [11].

Under the hypotheses of adiabatic conditions, temperature changes ΔT_{el} for orthotropic materials are related to changes in the stresses in the principal material directions by the following expression:

$$\Delta T_{el} = -\frac{T_0}{\rho C_p}\left(\alpha_1 \Delta\sigma_1 + \alpha_2 \Delta\sigma_2\right) \qquad (1)$$

Where α_1 and α_2 are the coefficients of linear thermal expansion relative to the principal axes, C_p is the specific heat at constant pressure, ρ is the density, T_0 is the absolute temperature and $\Delta\sigma_1$and $\Delta\sigma_2$ are the principal stresses.

The adopted acquisition systems of TSA, usually provide a non-radiometrically calibrated S signal proportional to the peak-to-peak variation in temperature during the peak-to-peak variation of the sum of principal stress. S is usually presented as a vector, where modulus is proportional to the change in temperature due to the thermoelastic effect and the phase φ means the angular shift between the thermoelastic and the reference signal [13]. In this case, the following equation can be used:

$$A^{*}S = \left(\alpha_1 \Delta\sigma_1 + \alpha_2 \Delta\sigma_2\right) \quad (2)$$

where A^{*} is a calibration constant.

The signal S can be expressed in time domain as follows:

$$s_{th} = \frac{S}{2}\sin(\omega t + \pi + \varphi) \quad (3)$$

where s is the non-calibrated thermoelastic signal, ω is the angular velocity and φ is the phase angle between temperature and loading signal. This angle depends on a number of parameters such as, for example, thickness of the painting or the grips of the loading machine. Whilst phase can slightly change through the area analyzed due to non-perfect homogeneity of the surface conditions, it remains locally constant in presence of linear elastic behaviour of material and adiabatic conditions. In the event of damage occurring, non-linearity of thermoelastic signal and phase variations can be observed [14].

As shown in Equation 3, the thermoelastic signal varies at the same frequency as the loading during the test.

It was demonstrated that the intrinsic dissipations occurred at twice the frequency of mechanical loading and are two orders lower than the thermoelastic type [18], [20]. The dissipative terms are irreversible sources unlike the thermoelastic type, causing the increase in the mean temperature of the specimen.

In effect, in presence of damage, a typical three-stage trend is reported in surface temperature measurement [15]; firstly, there is a mean temperature increase, secondly, it reaches an equilibrium value due to balancing in elastic dissipative sources and heat exchange effect [27].

Following the temperature plateau achieved, in the eventuality of failure occurring at a certain loading step, temperature will increase abruptly, as reported in [15].

Considering dissipative heat sources, the related thermal signal can be modelled by means of the following equation:

$$s_d = S2\sin(2\omega t) \quad (4)$$

where s_d is the non-calibrated thermographic signal correlated with irreversible sources and *S2* is the amplitude signal of thermal sources.

3. Experimental set-up

Twelve specimens were extracted from a laminate panel made of an epoxy-type resin reinforced with two internal layers of cross-plied quasi-isotropic glass fibre +45°/0°/-45°/90° and two external layers of unidirectional fibre of the 0°/90 type. The dimensions of specimens were fixed according to Standard ASTM D 3039 which were 25 mm wide, 250 mm long and 2.5 mm thick. All the specimens were tested on an MTS (model 370, 100 kN capacity) servo-hydraulic machine.

Conventional procedure was applied to test seven specimens of the twelve produced, providing the S-N curve and estimate of the fatigue limit. In Table 1, the maximum stress applied adopting a stress ratio of 0.1 and a loading frequency of 7 Hz is shown.

The same fatigue test parameters were used for the thermographic tests on the five leftover specimens. In this case, as shown in Table 2, a loading stepped procedure was performed starting with nominal stress amplitude ($\Delta\sigma/2$) of 30 MPa. At the end of each step (about 10,000 cycles of loading machine), the applied load was increased according to the values shown in Table 2.

The adopted experimental set-up for thermographic tests is shown in Figure 1.

An IR cooled In-Sb detector FLIR X6540 SC (640X512 pixel matrix array, thermal sensitivity NETD <30 mK) has been used both to collect the thermal data and for the monitoring of superficial temperature of specimens.

Referring to the fixed stress level, three thermal sequences were acquired respectively at 2,000 6,000 and 8,000 cycles, to investigate the damage within each loading step. These sequences in the paper will be indicated as Substep 1 (2,000 cycles), Substep 2 (6,000 cycles) and Substep 3 (8,000 cycles).

The adopted frame rate was 100 Hz. Each acquisition lasts 10 seconds, therefore 1000 frames were recorded. Thermal sequences were analyzed by Matlab® software.

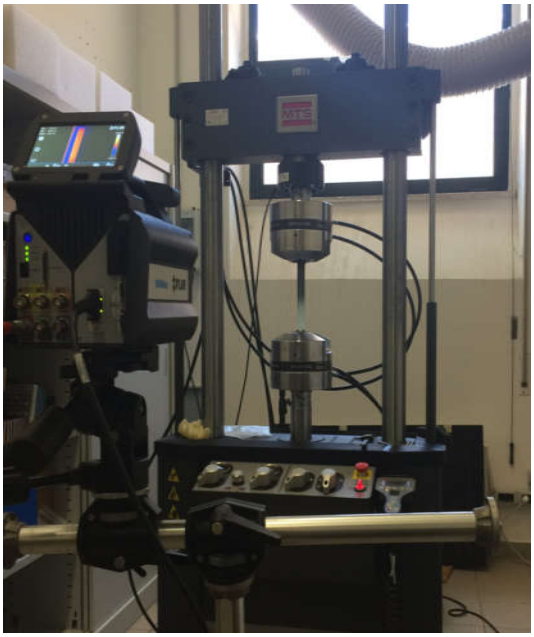

Figure1: Experimental set-up adopted for thermographic tests

Step	σ max [MPa]	Number of cycles
1	380	400
2	270	2,630
3	240	13,521
4	200	52,434
5	175	120,540
6	150	351,588
7	138.5	1,189,803

Table 1: Stresses and number of cycles to failure obtained on seven specimens

N	Δσ/2[MPa]	б min [MPa]	б max [MPa]	б mean [MPa]
1	30	4	44	24
2	35	7	67	37
3	40	8	78	43
4	45	9	89	49
5	50	10	100	55
6	55	11	111	61
7	60	12	122	67
8	65	13	133	73
9	70	14	144	79
10	75	16	156	86
11	80	17	167	92
12	85	18	178	98
13	90	20	200	110
14	100	22	222	122

Table 2: Number of loading steps and correspondent applied stresses

4. Methods and data analysis

A mathematical algorithm has been used to extract information pixel by pixel regarding parameters related to the surface temperature of the specimen, the signal amplitude, the phase of the thermoelastic signal and the amplitude of the second Fourier harmonic component associated with the intrinsic dissipations. In particular, a suitable thermographic signal model was used to study the thermal signal S_m evolution (not radiometrically calibrated) in the time domain, as indicated in equation (5):

$$S_m(t) = S_0 + at + S1\sin(\omega t + \varphi) + S2\sin(2\omega t) \qquad (5)$$

where the term $S_0 + at$ represents the increase in mean temperature during cyclic mechanical loading in terms of radiometric signal, ω is angular frequency of the mechanical imposed load, $S1$and φ are respectively related to the amplitude and the phase of the first harmonic component of the Fourier series while $S2$ represents the amplitude of the second Fourier harmonic component. Therefore, the term $S1$ corresponds to the signal variation related to thermoelastic effect and $S2$ is proportional to the amplitude of intrinsic dissipation.

Equation (5) was integrated in the algorithm of IRTA® software providing images in the form of data matrix for each constant parameter. The phase φ of thermoelastic signal has not been taken into account in this paper since it will be shown in a further work.

The procedure for the processing of thermographic data was applied for each loading step and sub-step and provides:

- The acquisition of the thermographic sequence. About one thousand frames were acquired for each sequence.
- Assessing of the three thermal signals: S_0, $S1$and $S2$ pixel by pixel (IRTA® software),
- Application of a Gaussian 2D-smoothing on IRTA® data matrix for the purposes of noise reduction. In this regard, the Gaussian kernel provides a gentler smoothing and preserves edges better than a similarly sized mean filter.
- Reduction of data matrix (area of analysis) to refer the analysis only to the area of gauge length. In this case, the area of analysis was the same for S_0, $S_1$and S_2, (A1 area, Figure 2) and includes 405x49 pixels (mm/pixel=0.4).

For signal S_0 (radiometric temperature signal), the processing steps are:

- Subtracting the environmental temperature influence on temperature signal S_0 achieved during each step and sub-step (ΔS_0), which is required in order to obtain a good estimation

of the temperature changes which are due to material damage. Environmental temperature signal has been measured by using a dummy specimen (A2 area in Figure 2).

- Evaluation of the 98th value of percentile to avoid outliers in temperature signal measurements (ΔS_{0_98perc}) in the considered data matrix (A1 area). As stated by [28], since the energy of damage is proportional to the dissipated energy as heat per cycle, in order to closely follow the dissipation phenomena, 98th percentile temperature value is chosen as a guideline.

For signal *S1* (thermoelastic signal), the analysis involves:

- Subtracting a thermoelastic amplitude data matrix of the first loading step when no damage occurred to provide a reference condition between damaged and undamaged situations. In this way, the thermoelastic variations are related to an undamaged reference condition (ΔS_1).
- Normalizing the thermoelastic data matrix with respect to the stress amplitude $\Delta\sigma$ in order to detect the thermoelastic signal variation associated with damage ($S1_{norm}=\Delta S_1/\Delta\sigma$).
- Evaluation of the maximum and the minimum values of the thermoelastic signal ($\Delta S_1/\Delta\sigma$) in order to assess the $\Delta S1_{norm}=S1_{norm\_max}-S1_{norm\_min}$ from the data matrix. In order to avoid isolated bad pixels due for example, to “dead pixels”, values of 98th and 2nd percentile have been used in this paper in place of $S1_{norm_max}$and $S1_{norm\_min}$($\Delta S1_{norm\_98\text{-}2perc}$).

The processing of signal component *S2* (radiometric thermographic signal correlated to the intrinsic dissipations) refers to the:

- assessment of 98th percentile value of the *S2* signal (S_{2_98perc}).The choice of 98th percentile value is held up by the fact that signal variations are so low when compared to the other

parameters, thus, the end of excluding the influence of isolated bad pixels in the analysis is pursued.

The procedure is shown in Figure 3 in a graphic flow-chart form.

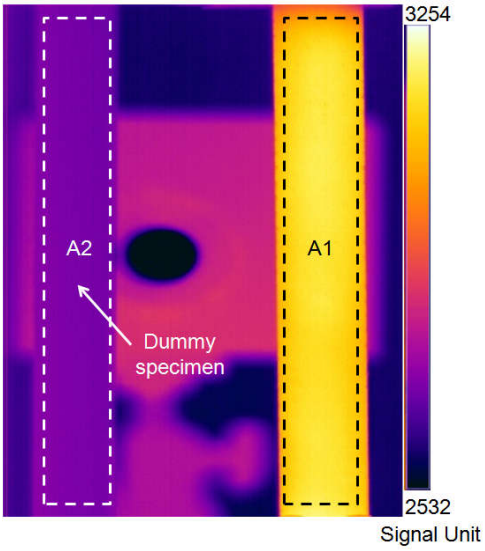

Figure 2: Area considered for the analysis (A1) and for evaluating of environmental temperature signal (A2, dummy specimen)

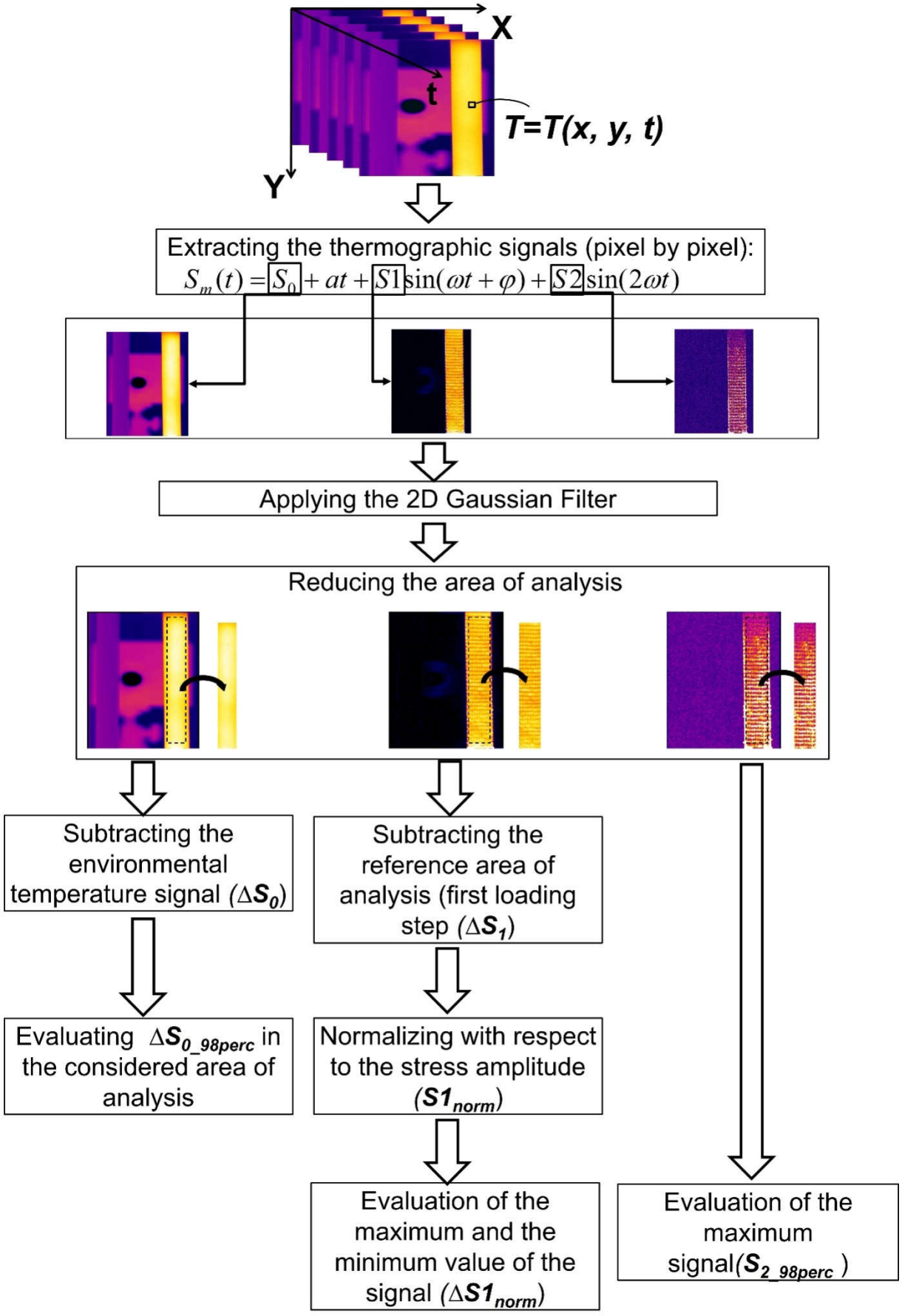

Figure 3: Flow chart of the proposed procedure

5. Results and discussions

In Figure 4, the convectional curve S-N obtained is shown together with the data of Table 1 (seven of the specimens tested) which allows for the estimation of the fatigue limit of material for a conventional number of cycles. To derive an interval estimation of 'future' observation, it would be appropriate to include in the graph in Figure 4, a 90% survival probability (prediction straight lines) using a confidence interval of 95%, (dashed lines in Figure 4).

Considering a number of $2*10^6$ cycles as lifetime reference within High Cycle Fatigue as suggested by Standard Test Method [29], a value of 127.4 MPa is extracted by data series, representing the fatigue limit in terms of σ_{max} and of 56.12 MPa in terms of stress amplitude ($\Delta\sigma/2$).

Figure 5 shows the evolution of the temperature signal expressed as radiometric signal (ΔS_0) for Specimen 1 and for four different loading conditions (Substep 3). The depicted curve in Figure 5 refers to the mean temperature trend during the stepwise procedure and has been already discussed by several authors [15-17][28]. A uniform increase of the signal is obtained in the whole gauge area and even in the last loading step (90 MPa) local differences of signal in correspondence to damage, are observed.

In the same way, in Figure 6, the maps of thermoelastic signal (Specimen 1, Substep 3) are reported.

Considering the reference stress condition of 30 MPa, thermoelastic signal experiences positive and negative value variations. As already demonstrated in other works [13], [14], TSA allows for location of the damaged areas of material and in particular, the thermoelastic signal variations are related to the redistribution of the stresses caused by stiffness degradation due to damage[14].

As confirmed by other authors [14], by analyzing stress maps, mechanical behaviour of fibers and matrix is indeed assessed.

In Figure7, the maps of the thermal signal at twice the loading frequency are shown (Specimen 1, Sub step 3). In addition, in this case, a significant increase of the signal is obtained as the applied stress increases.

As demonstrated by parameter maps at a fixed stress level of 60 MPa, the failure appears on the right side of the gauge length as depicted in Fig. 6 -7 (Area A, crack initiation at 60 MPa). At 90 MPa, the occurrence of cracks hits most of the gauge length.

All maps seem to provide different and complementary information about the type of damage to material. In this regard, further works and other experimental techniques are necessary to relate the different damage mechanisms to the proposed thermographic signal procedure.

The trend of the signals evaluated with the proposed algorithm is shown in Figure 8 as a function of the amplitude stress for each sub-step. In particular, the radiometric temperature signal increases for each loading step due to the viscoelastic nature of the matrix material until a significant increase is verified in correspondence with the presence of the damage mechanisms, while thermoelastic (*S1*) and double frequency signal (*S2*) show significant variations only for stress values above 60 MPa.

Interesting considerations can be made by observing signal behaviour in correspondence with each sub-step, Figure 8. In fact, no appreciable signal differences are present among the three sub-steps excluding the last loading step coincident with the failure of the specimen.

The procedure described in the work of De Finis et al. [15] has been used for evaluating the fatigue limit for each measured signal ($\Delta S_{0\_98perc,}$ $\Delta S1_{norm_98\text{-}2perc}$and $S2_{98\_perc}$). For each specimen and for each sub-step, the adopted procedure consists of:

1. Linear regression analysis of the first 4 data couples ($P; \Delta\sigma/2$) and evaluation of the best fit line ($y=mx+q$). P represents the generic thermographic signal.
2. Evaluation of residuals of P (P_r) for each loading step.
3. Evaluation of standard deviation (σ_{P_r}) and mean (μ) of residuals (P_r) of the first 4 data for each test.
4. Evaluation of the threshold value as $P_{th}=\mu+6*\sigma_{P\_r}$

5. Evaluation of the first loading step (of P_r data) for which the condition: $(P\_r)_N > P_{th}$ is verified (where N is the number of the loading step). The first loading step exceeding the condition is considered the estimation of fatigue limit.

Figure 9(a)-(c) graphically illustrates the above procedure for Specimen 1 at Substep 3. In particular, the residuals are plotted versus the stress amplitude and the dotted line represents the threshold value adopted for the estimation of the fatigue limit. By using other methods it may be difficult to detect this point. The graphical approach [16],[17], which involves separation of the data series for the assessment of the breakpoint, is not objective, and deduction and identification are hindered due to the noise affecting thermal measurements.

In Table 3, the results (fatigue limits in terms of stress semi-amplitudes) for each parameter (ΔS_{0_98perc}, $\Delta S1_{norm\_98\text{-}2perc}$ and $S2\_{98perc}$) at each sub-step are reported for five tested specimens.

As shown in Table 3, referring to a single test, the results show good reproducibility and thus, the reliability of the technique is demonstrated.

This aspect is confirmed by Table 4 in which overall results of five tests are compared with the standard test method. The results of thermal methods fit well with the S-N value reference as endorsed by the small standard deviation. In particular, referring to the analysis of three parameters the closest one to the reference value (56.12 MPa) is the $S2\_{98perc}$ parameter (~58 MPa), although the others provide a good estimation of fatigue limit.

As already shown in Figure 8(a)-(c), no difference exists among sub-steps and the adopted procedure for evaluating the fatigue limit provides the same value for each sub-step. Moreover, the considered thermographic parameters for low stress values seem independent from the number of cycles at which the thermographic sequence was acquired. This means that an estimation of the fatigue limit could be obtained with the proposed procedure very rapidly since the thermographic data can be acquired at any time during the tests, whilst for the traditional procedure it is necessary to achieve steady state conditions before acquisition.

Results obtained with thermography techniques are in good agreement with the fatigue limit obtained in the conventional manner by considering a run-out limit of $2*10^6$ cycles.

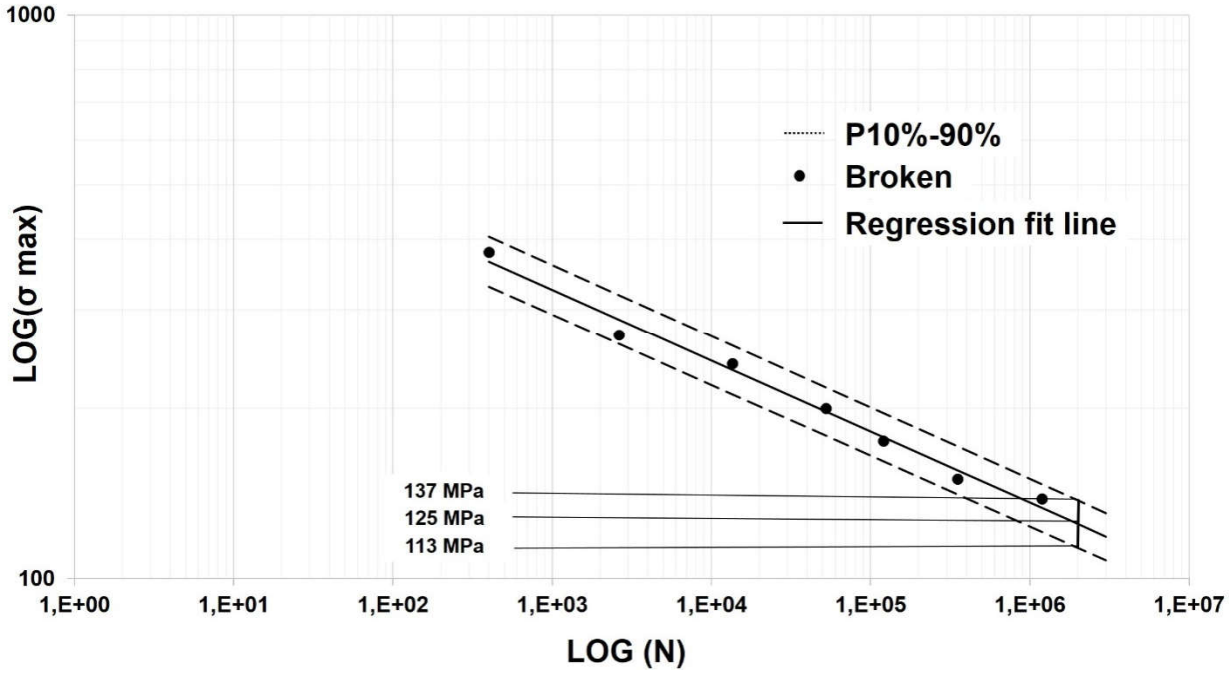

Figure 4: Conventional S-N curve and estimation of the fatigue limit in correspondence with a run-out limit of $2*10^6$ cycles.

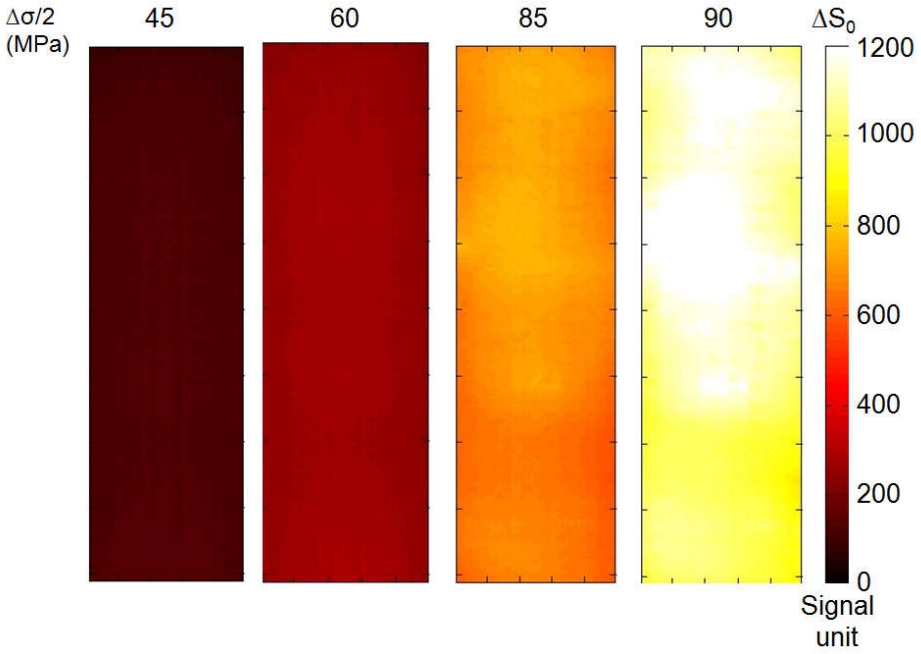

Figure 5: Maps of the radiometric signal obtained for four different loading steps, (Specimen 1, Sub-step 3)

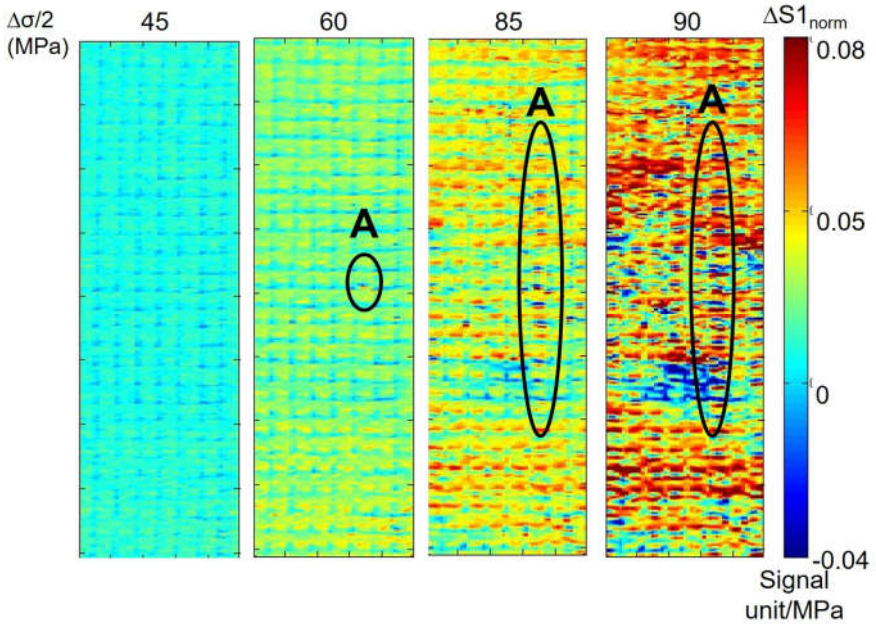

Figure 6: Maps of the thermoelastic signal obtained for four different loading steps, (Specimen 1, Sub-step 3)

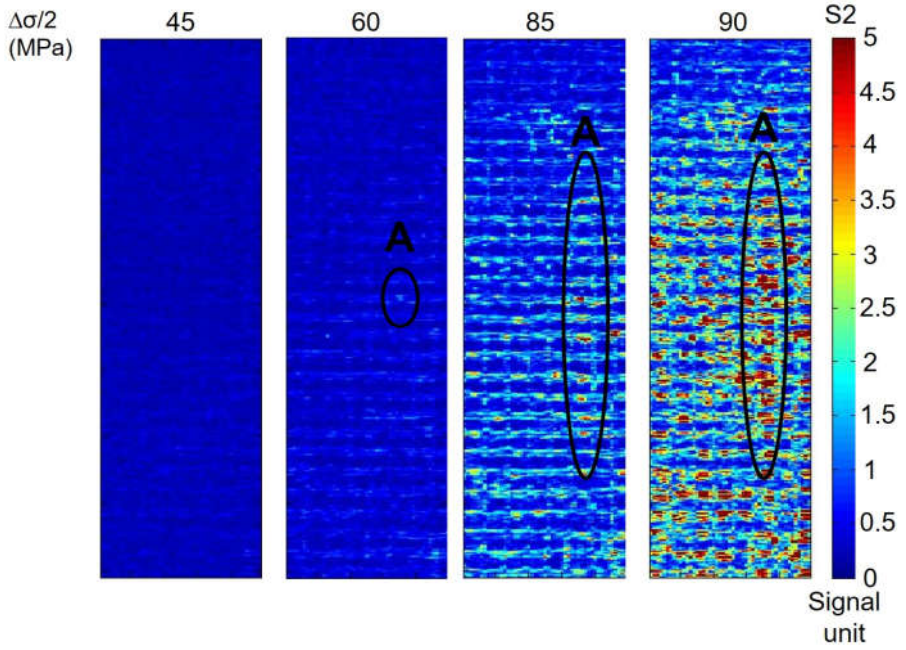

Figure 7: Maps of the thermographic signal at the twice the loading frequency obtained for four different loading steps, (Specimen 1, Sub-step3).

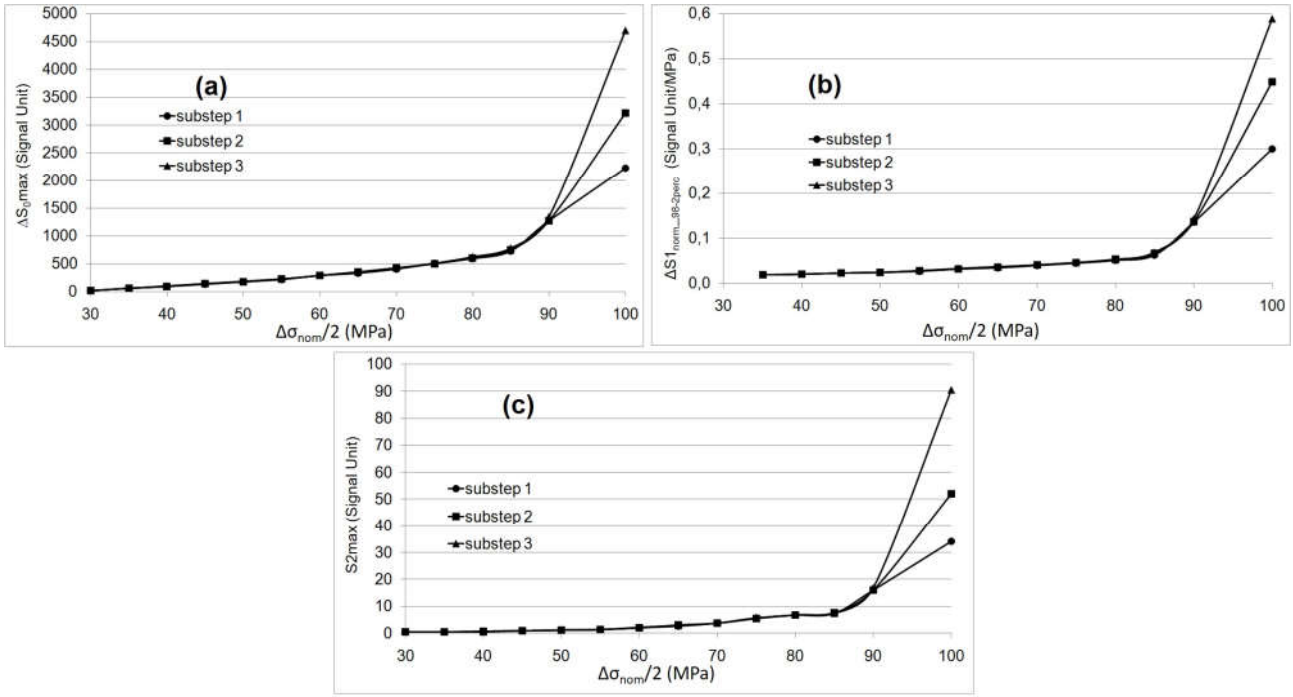

Figure 8: Thermographic signals obtained with proposed procedure as function of the amplitude stress for Specimen 1: comparison among the three sub-steps for the parameter (a)ΔS_0, (b) ΔS_1 (c) S_2.

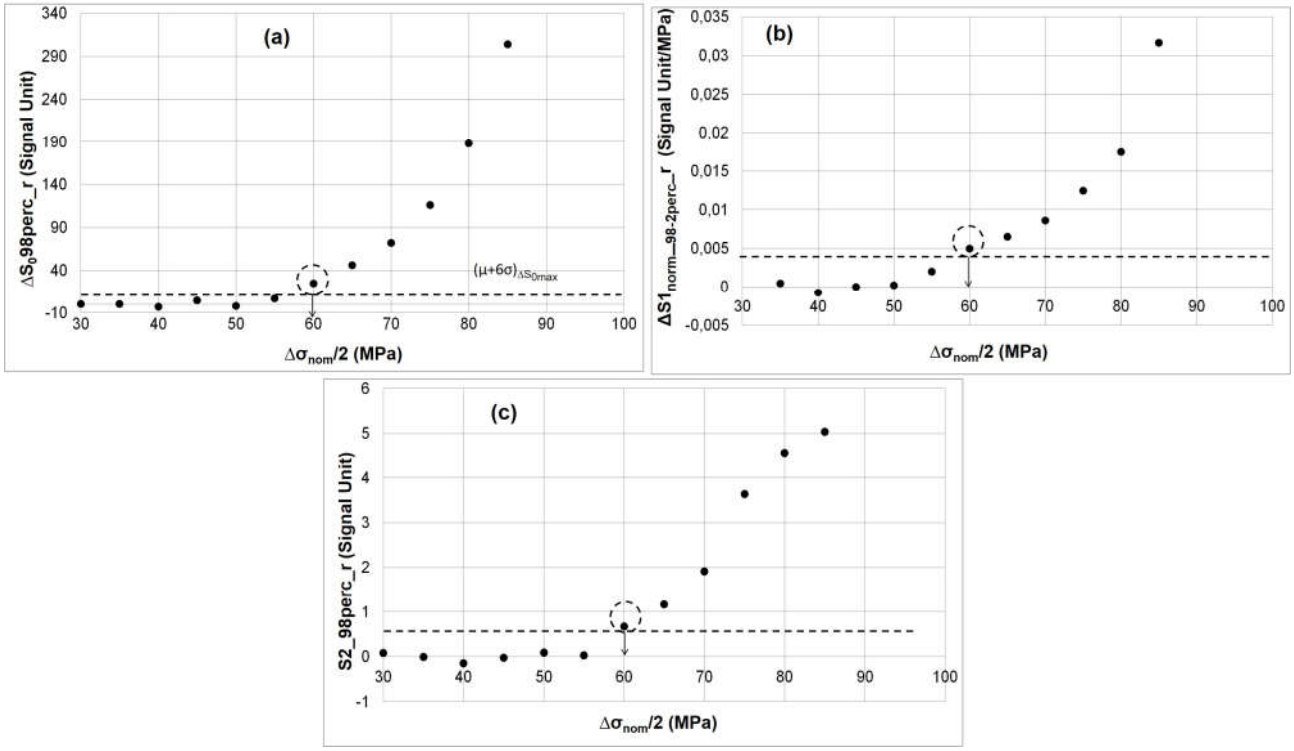

Figure 9: Estimation of the fatigue limit with method [15], (Specimen 1, Sub-step 3): comparison among residual of the three parameters (a)ΔS_0, (b)ΔS_1 (c)S_2.

N° Specimen	Loading sub-step	ΔS_{0_98perc} (MPa)	$\Delta S1_{norm\_98\text{-}2perc}$ (MPa)	$S2_{\_98perc}$ (MPa)
1	1	60.00	60.00	65.00
	2	60.00	60.00	60.00
	3	60.00	60.00	60.00
	Average	60.00	60.00	61.67
2	1	60.00	60.00	60.00
	2	60.00	60.00	60.00
	3	60.00	65.00	60.00
	Average	60.00	61.67	60.00
3	1	60.00	65.00	55.00
	2	60.00	70.00	55.00
	3	60.00	65.00	50.00
	Average	60.00	66.67	53.33
4	1	70.00	55.00	55.00
	2	65.00	55.00	70.00
	3	65.00	70.00	55.00
	Average	66.67	60.00	60.00
5	1	60.00	65.00	55.00
	2	55.00	65.00	50.00
	3	55.00	65.00	55.00
	Average	56.67	65.00	53.33

Table 3: Comparison between overall results in sub-step, accomplished by adopting the thermographic technique.

N° Specimen	ΔS_{0_98perc} *(MPa)*	$\Delta S1_{norm\_98\text{-}2perc}$ *(MPa)*	$S2_{\_98perc}$ *(MPa)*	***S-N curve (2*10⁶ cycles)***
1	60.00	60.00	61.67	
2	60.00	61.67	60.00	
3	60.00	66.67	53.33	
4	66.67	60.00	60.00	**Δσ/2 = 56.12 MPa**
5	56.67	65.00	53.33	
Average	**60.67**	**62.67**	**57.67**	
Standard Deviation	**3.65**	**3.03**	**4.01**	

Table 4: Comparison between overall results accomplished by adopting the thermographic technique and conventional fatigue tests

6. Conclusions

In this work, a novel procedure has been proposed for evaluating the fatigue limit of GFRP composite materials with thermography. In particular, the uncalibrated signal has been analyzed in the time domain in order to extract useful parameters concerning the thermal signal related to the thermoelastic and dissipative sources.

Five specimens were used for the fatigue tests and each specimen was subjected to a loading step procedure until failure. Three thermal sequences were acquired during each step in correspondence with three different cycle numbers. Three thermal signals were obtained from processed data: the thermal signal related to the increase of the mean temperature of the specimen, the signal related to the thermoelastic source and the signal related to the intrinsic dissipations.

A statistical method, validated for metallic materials has been used for evaluating the fatigue limit for each thermal signal extracted by the analysis. Results show a good agreement with those obtained by the conventional S-N curve.

The proposed procedure represents a useful tool for rapidly evaluating the fatigue limit with respect to the traditional thermographic method and the technique shows great potential as a non-destructive testing tool, thus, it could well be suitable for the monitoring of real and more complex components undergoing actual loading conditions.

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