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Ultrasonic Techniques for the Evaluation of Ceramic Joints

W. A. Simpson, Jr.
R. W. McClung

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ULTRASONIC TECHNIQUES FOR THE EVALUATION OF CERAMIC JOINTS

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ULTRASONIC TECHNIQUES FOR THE EVALUATION OF CERAMIC JOINTS*

W. A. Simpson, Jr., and R. W. McClung

ABSTRACT

The increasing use of structural ceramics in high-temperature applications has led to the need for nondestructive evaluation techniques to ensure the integrity of the ceramic materials and the quality of joints consisting of ceramics bonded to ceramics or to metals. We describe the development of ultrasonic techniques for the characterization of ceramic materials and for the detection of flaws in these materials and at ceramic joints. This work has led to the ability to determine which face of a 60- μ m-thick layer of braze filler material is unbonded, thus providing information about the integrity of the ceramic-filler metal bond. We also describe the development of a rapid technique using Lamb waves to probe the bond between alumina coupons in flexure-strength specimens, whose geometry makes conventional ultrasonic evaluation of the bond difficult.

INTRODUCTION

The excellent high-temperature thermal, mechanical, and physical properties of structural ceramics make them likely choices for use in advanced engine designs to allow higher combustion temperatures and therefore higher thermodynamic efficiencies. In addition, the lower weight of such materials relative to that of high-temperature structural alloys should increase an engine's ratio of power to weight. Unfortunately, the low fracture toughness, and hence the small critical flaw size, of structural ceramics precludes the use of standard nondestructive evaluation (NDE) techniques that have been developed over the last 30 years for detection and characterization of critical flaws in metals. For example, flaws of critical size in most structural metals can be detected with ultrasonic waves whose frequencies lie in the range from 1 to 10 MHz. Consequently, most development in ultrasonics has encompassed this frequency range, with little activity occurring above 15 to 20 MHz. In conventional monolithic ceramics, however, the critical flaw size is about

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20 μm , and for such small flaw sizes the use of frequencies of 50 MHz and higher is required. In addition, detection of such small flaws requires the use of focused radiation, and the propagation of such energy through the ceramic surface introduces severe aberration into the beam, thus limiting to a few millimeters the depth at which effective focus can be maintained. Finally, several heat engine designs require that a ceramic be joined to a metal to take advantage of the physical and/or mechanical properties of each. These applications require the development of technology for joining ceramics to other ceramics and to metals and, no less importantly, for inspecting such joints nondestructively to ensure bond integrity. This report describes work performed by the Nondestructive Testing Group of the Metals and Ceramics Division on the development of equipment and techniques for detecting small flaws in ceramic-ceramic and ceramic-metal joints.

The objective of this program is to investigate methods for NDE of ceramic joints leading to recommendations and development of techniques for evaluating important properties and characteristics that affect the serviceability of joints.

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES AND RESULTS

CERAMIC MATERIALS

In order to develop techniques for the inspection of ceramic joints it is first necessary to characterize the ceramic materials themselves, since they will often be the determining factor in the choice of test parameters. This is in contrast to the ultrasonic inspection of metals, where the properties other than the wave velocities of the host can frequently be neglected. The engineering constants (Young's modulus, Poisson's ratio, etc.) can easily be determined nondestructively for ceramics by well-known techniques, but this information does not determine the basic inspectability of the sample for a given flaw size. For example, two specimens may have identical engineering constants, but one may be inspectable with 100-MHz ultrasonic energy while the second may not transmit energy above 20 MHz. This behavior results from the fact that

attenuation is highly sensitive to the microstructure of the host; for example, one can glean some information about the average grain size from an attenuation measurement. Therefore, to the determination of the standard engineering constants should be added the attenuation behavior of the particular specimen for ultrasonic energy in a frequency range commensurate with the flaw size of interest.

Transfer Curve

Although the measurement of attenuation at discrete frequencies is a standard procedure in ultrasonics, the use of such an approach at the high frequencies employed in ceramic inspection would be prohibitively expensive because of the high cost of transducers. A much better approach is to use a single broadband transducer to transmit a range of frequencies and, using a computer, to analyze each frequency component separately. This approach offers the additional advantage of automating the application of corrections to compensate for such nonspecimen losses as beam spread, acoustic impedance mismatch, etc. In addition, the effects of the transducer response and system electronics can be removed from the acquired data to yield a true attenuation versus frequency response for the specimen. This response is termed the transfer curve of the specimen, in analogy to the similar function in optics. In our work, all these corrections have been incorporated into a single computer program that computes the transfer curve from input data consisting of the signals reflected from the front and rear surfaces of a planar sample of the material under test.

When we first began computing transfer curves for ceramics, several anomalies arose that could not be attributed to the samples. In particular, the attenuation in all samples at frequencies above about 30 MHz was much higher than would be expected from optical measurements of the microstructure. This behavior was ultimately traced to the very thin ($<1\text{-}\mu\text{m}$) layer of water used to couple the ultrasonic energy into the ceramic part. For frequencies less than about 15 MHz, the thickness of this coupling layer is such a small fraction of the ultrasonic wavelength that it is negligible. As the frequency increases, however, the coupling layer becomes a larger fraction of a wavelength, and its presence is no longer negligible. When we analyzed this configuration, treating it as a

three-layer rather than a two-layer problem, it became obvious that a correction would have to be added to account for the presence of the coupling layer. Figure 1 shows how the reflection coefficient varies as a function of frequency for a water coupling layer 1 μm thick. At lower frequencies the coefficient approaches the two-layer value, where the effect of the water is negligible. Our computer program was subsequently modified to actually measure the thickness of the coupling layer during a test and provide a correction in the data. The transfer curve so obtained is now highly repeatable and in agreement with destructive analysis.

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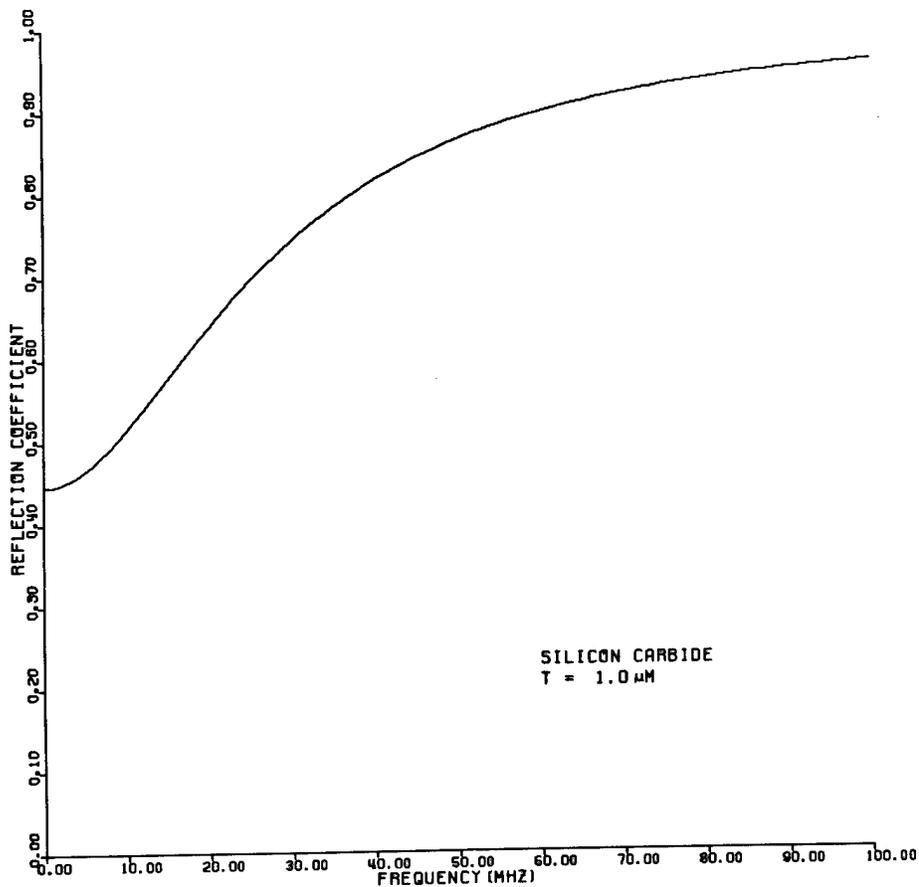


Fig. 1. Reflection coefficient at a water-silicon carbide interface for a 1- μm water layer.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the effect of the microstructure on the transfer curve. In Fig. 2, the sample is a piece of tetragonal zirconia polycrystalline (TZP) ceramic with a microstructure of primarily 10- μm tetragonal-phase grains. In Fig. 3, however, the sample is a partially stabilized zirconia (PSZ) with predominantly cubic grains about 100 μm in diameter. It is difficult to propagate through the PSZ an elastic wave whose frequency exceeds about 30 MHz because of severe scattering losses. For such material, the minimum detectable void diameter is probably also about 100 μm .

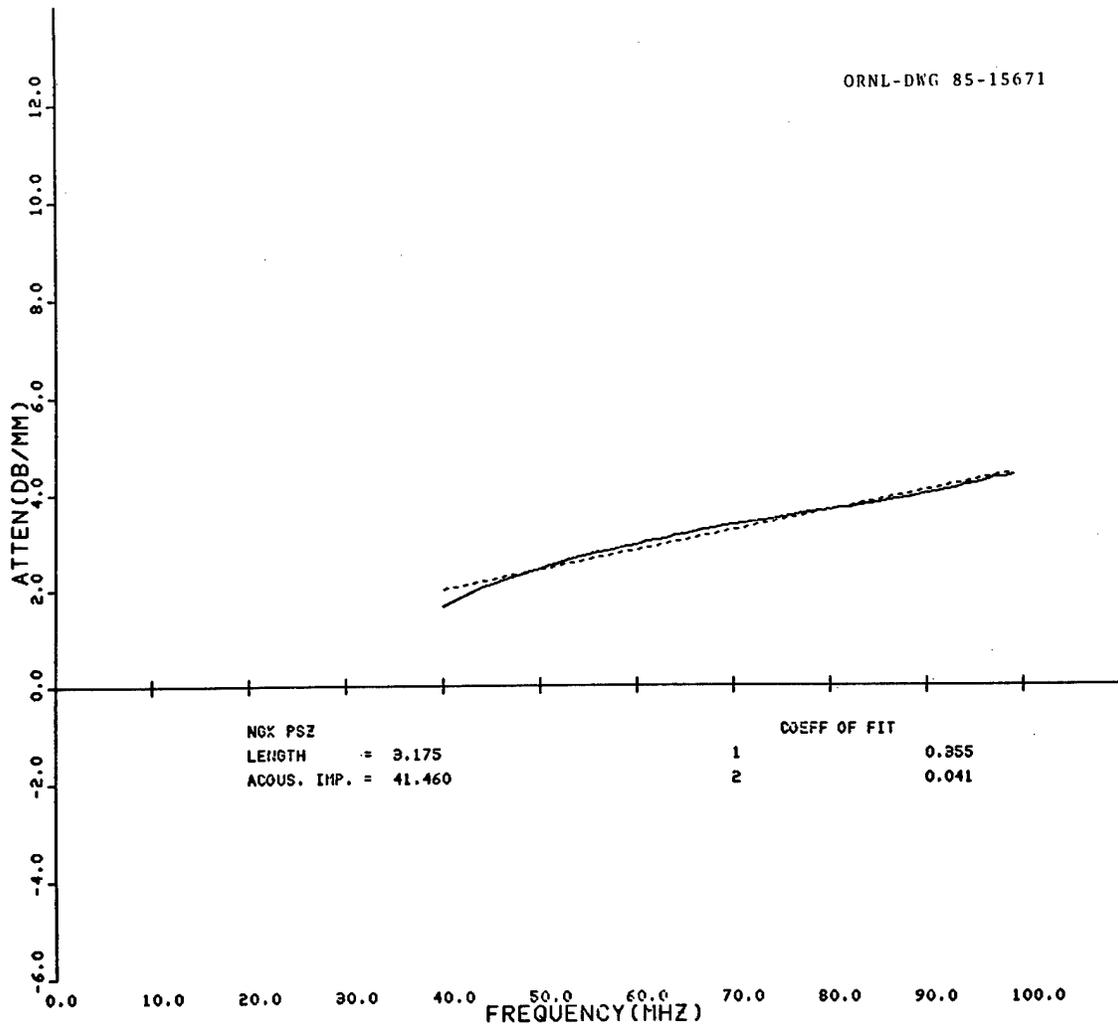


Fig. 2. Transfer curve of tetragonal zirconia polycrystalline ceramic.

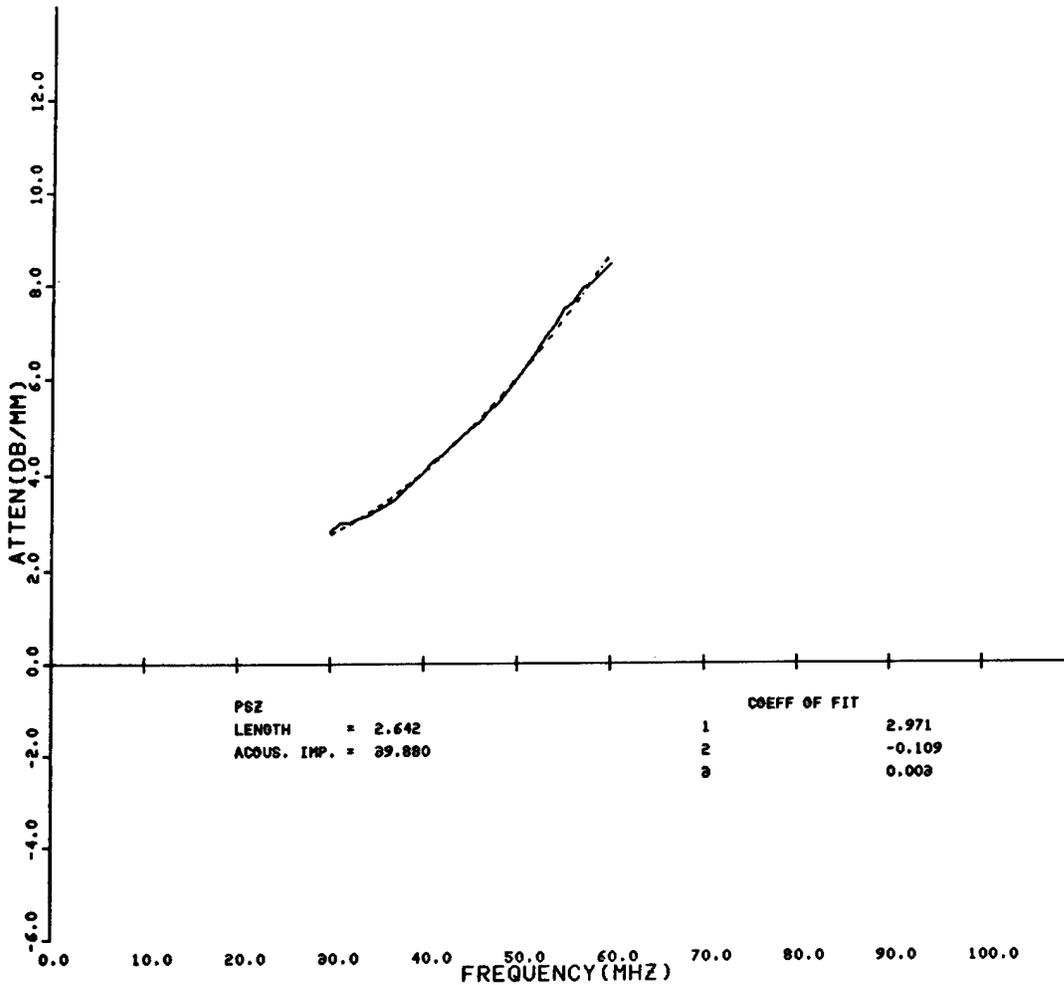


Fig. 3. Transfer curve of partially stabilized zirconia.

Detection of Flaws in Ceramics

Also of interest in characterizing the ultrasonic response of a ceramic material is the detection of flaws comparable to or larger than the critical flaw size, particularly if they occur in the vicinity of a joint. From published destructive analyses of flaw initiators in ceramic materials, a common flaw shape is the quasi-spherical void or inclusion. This is fortuitous, since a model exists for the scattering of elastic waves from spherical cavities and inclusions.¹ For a planar crack, we have previously demonstrated a successful model for measuring crack size.²

Figure 4 shows the calculated response to elastic waves of a spherical void in silicon nitride. The abscissa is the dimensionless product of the wave number, k (i.e., $2\pi/\lambda$, where λ is the ultrasonic wavelength in centimeters), of the incident radiation and the void radius, a . For a given flaw size, the abscissa is thus proportional to frequency. The ordinate is the differential scattering cross section. The response may be divided into three regions: (1) the low-frequency region (Rayleigh scattering) in which the scattering increases as the fourth power of the frequency, (2) the transition region (located at $ka \approx 1$), and (3) the high-frequency region in which the scattering cross section is oscillatory with an approximately constant average value. The latter behavior can be traced to interference between two waves scattered by the sphere. The first is the direct wave reflected from the near point of the sphere, and the second is the so-called "creeping" wave, which, after tangential incidence, propagates around the sphere and is reemitted after

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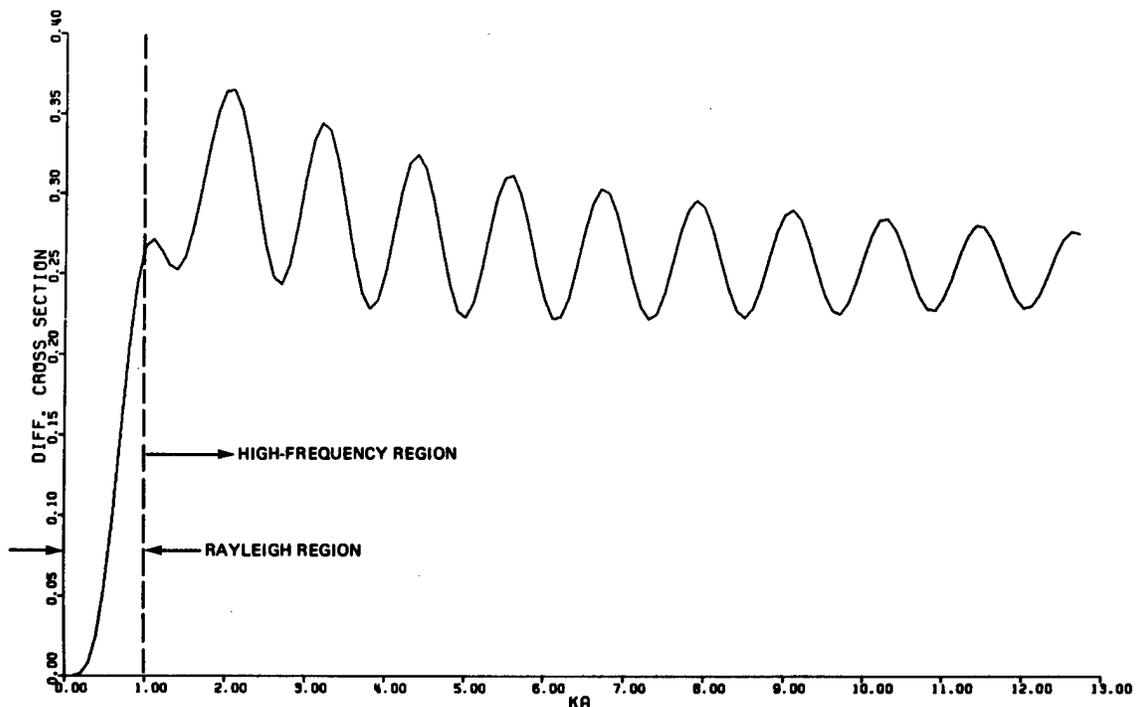


Fig. 4. Differential cross section for scattering from a spherical void.

traversing half the circumference. The periodicity of the oscillation is thus related to the size of the void. For natural flaws, however, even those whose shape is very nearly spherical, the surface roughness may rapidly attenuate the latter wave, and the high-frequency scattering depicted in Fig. 4 may be replaced by a near-constant value. In this case, the size of the scattering center may be approximated by noting that the transition region occurs at $ka \approx 1$; thus if the frequency of the turning point, that is, the transition from Rayleigh to high-frequency scattering, is known, the radius of the sphere may be estimated.

Figure 5 shows experimental data obtained on a natural flaw in TZP ceramic. Here the turning point occurs at about 89 MHz. Based on the measured velocity, the flaw diameter was estimated to be approximately 25 μm . That the flaw size is of this order of magnitude is also supported by the fact that it could not be detected reliably with a scan increment of 50 μm but could with an increment of 25 μm .

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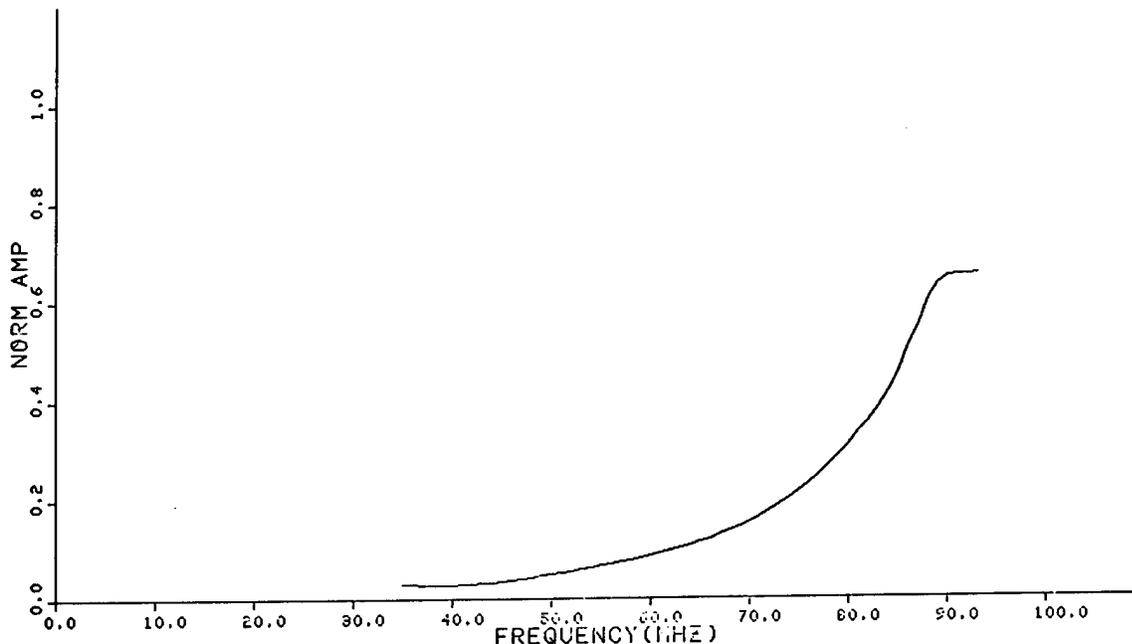


Fig. 5. Experimental data for scattering from a natural flaw in tetragonal zirconia polycrystalline ceramic.

PLANAR JOINTS

Ceramic-Cap Piston Specimens

Two large ceramic-to-metal brazements that mock up the attachment of a ceramic cap to a diesel engine piston were made available for nondestructive testing studies. These specimens are 111 mm (4 3/8 in.) in diameter and consist of a 6.4-mm-thick (0.25-in.) PSZ cap brazed to a nodular cast iron (NCI) disk via a titanium transition piece and a commercial Ag-Cu-Sn brazing filler metal.³ The surface of the ceramic had been vapor coated with titanium to promote wetting by the filler metal. Figure 6 shows the geometry of the joint and Fig. 7 one of the specimens. The thickness of each braze layer was about 60 μm and that of the titanium transition piece about 0.6 mm.

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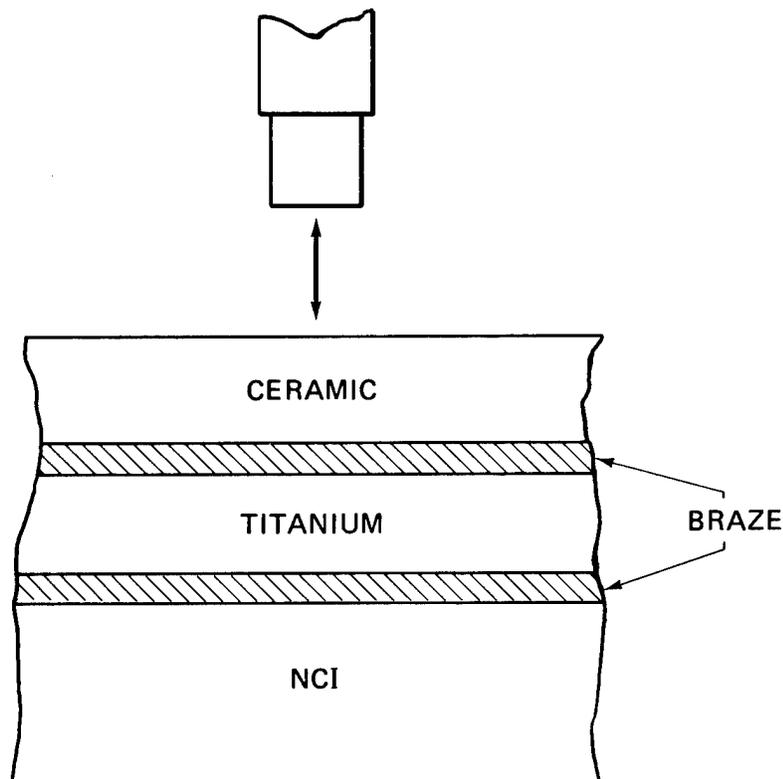


Fig. 6. Diagram of a transition joint for bonding a ceramic to nodular cast iron (NCI) to simulate a diesel-engine piston with a ceramic cap.

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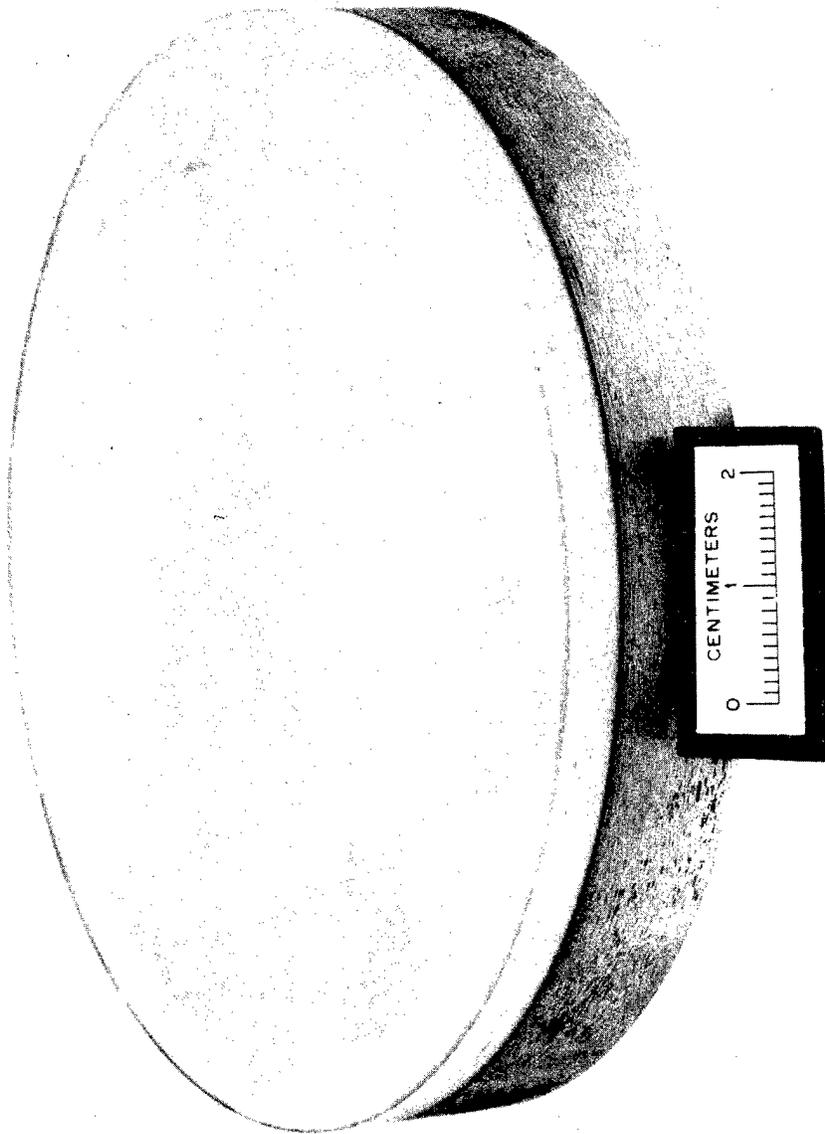


Fig. 7. Ceramic-cap diesel-engine piston specimen (one of two).

Initial ultrasonic examination of each specimen indicated a relatively high attenuation for elastic waves in the ceramic cap, restricting the maximum usable frequency to about 25 MHz. From our previous studies of the attenuation characteristics of PSZ material, this behavior was consistent with the scattering losses produced by the relatively large grain size ($\approx 100 \mu\text{m}$) of this ceramic.

Both specimens were scanned in our high-frequency (100-MHz) ultrasonic system, which permits variations in the transmission of the ceramic-metal bond to be displayed as a gray-scale image. A flat (unfocused), broadband transducer was used, and both samples were found to contain nonbonded regions near the center. Figure 8 shows the result for one of the brazements. Here lighter areas indicate relatively better transmission through (less reflection from) the bond, and darker areas indicate relatively poorer transmission (greater reflection). The dark area near the center is completely unbonded. (In the original data this area was uniformly dark; it did not reproduce well photographically, however.) The dark ring near the periphery of the sample is an edge effect caused by the unfocused transducer.

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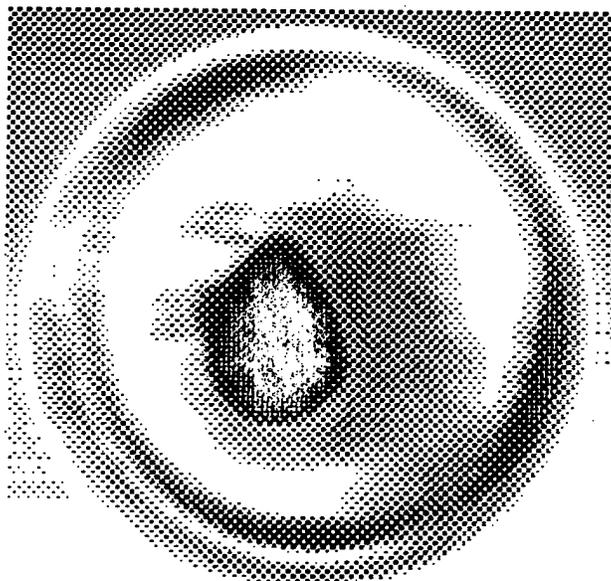


Fig. 8. Gray-scale presentation of ultrasonic transmission through the bond in piston specimen 1.

The samples were scanned a second time using a focused transducer. Focusing minimizes edge effects and more sharply delineates the region of unbond. Figure 9 shows the raw gray-scale data for the second sample, which is seen to be unbonded in the center and at several locations around the periphery.

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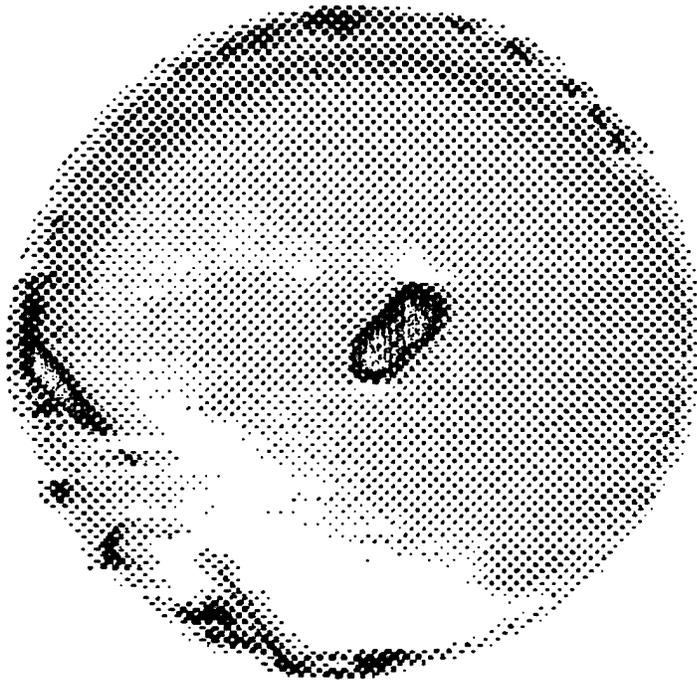


Fig. 9. Gray-scale presentation of ultrasonic transmission through the bond in piston specimen 2.

The raw pixel data from these gray-scale images were next computer processed to permit expansion of a selected range of gray-scale values. Such processing allows minor (<3-dB) bond variations to be ignored and fluctuations within the unbonded areas to be enhanced. Figures 10 and 11 show the processed images for the two specimens. As expected, the areas delineated show virtually no variations, which is indicative of complete unbonding. The shape, size, and location of the affected areas are also precisely determined by this processing.

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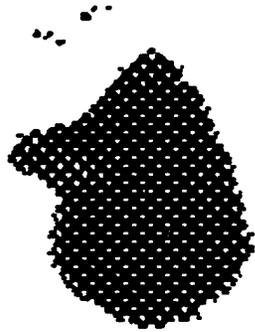


Fig. 10. Enhanced gray-scale presentation of ultrasonic transmission through the bond in piston specimen 1.

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Fig. 11. Enhanced gray-scale presentation of ultrasonic transmission through the bond in piston specimen 2.

Because there are several interfaces in the PSZ-NCI joint (Fig. 6), one would like to know at which of these interfaces the unbond occurs, since this information could provide insight into the origin of the problem. In addition, while the precise location of the unbond may be immaterial from an accept-reject point of view, such information is important in the development of ceramic brazing technology. For example, if the unbond occurs at the ceramic-braze interface, it could indicate a failure of the braze filler metal to wet the ceramic surface, and wettability is a major consideration of the brazing development program. Fortunately, the location of the unbond can be determined nondestructively from the ultrasonic scattering data. Figure 12 shows the rf waveform of signals scattered by the transition joint in three areas of the specimen whose data were shown in Figs. 9 and 11. In Fig. 12, the upper trace (trace A) is that obtained from a well-bonded region. The two signals are from the faces of the 600- μm -thick titanium transition piece, with the PSZ to the left and NCI to the right. The ultrasonic wave is incident from the PSZ. In trace B, the second signal is much larger, and the third signal, resulting from reverberation in the titanium, indicates that the unbond occurs on the NCI side of the titanium. In trace C, the first signal is much larger, and the absence of the signal from the opposite face of the titanium indicates that the sample is unbonded on the PSZ side of the titanium.

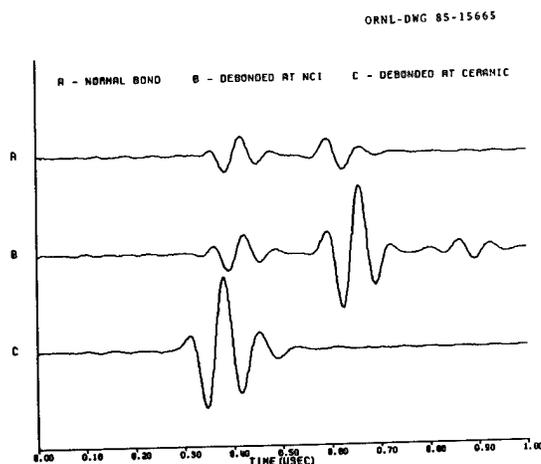


Fig. 12. Radio-frequency waveform of the ultrasonic signal scattered by the interface of piston specimen 2 for various bond conditions.

If the ceramic material will support elastic waves of a sufficiently high frequency, the signals from opposite faces of the nominal 60- μm -thick braze layer can be resolved (a time resolution of only 30 ns), and it is then possible to tell directly whether the unbond occurs at the ceramic-braze or braze-titanium interface. For example, Fig. 13 shows the waveform obtained from the joint region of a sample containing TZP (wide bandwidth) ceramic. The first two signals originate at the faces of the nominal 60- μm -thick braze layer between the TZP and the titanium transition piece. The second two are from the similar braze layer between the titanium and the NCI substrate. Note that the signals from the braze layers are resolved, which permits the condition of any of the four interfaces to be monitored. The restricted bandwidth of the PSZ is not sufficient to resolve these signals (frequencies above about 30 MHz are not transmitted). However, we have recently developed a technique to enhance the resolution of closely spaced ultrasonic signals.⁴ Use of this technique will generally produce delta functions in the output data at the location of each individual wave center in the input data, even when the waves are too closely spaced to resolve in the time domain. When this technique was used to process the signals from the data of Fig. 12, the signals from either face of the braze layers could be resolved, as shown in Fig. 14. Since all four signals are present, the region is one in which the sample is well bonded. For the central unbond region of the simulator shown in Fig. 11, however, the processed data show only a single

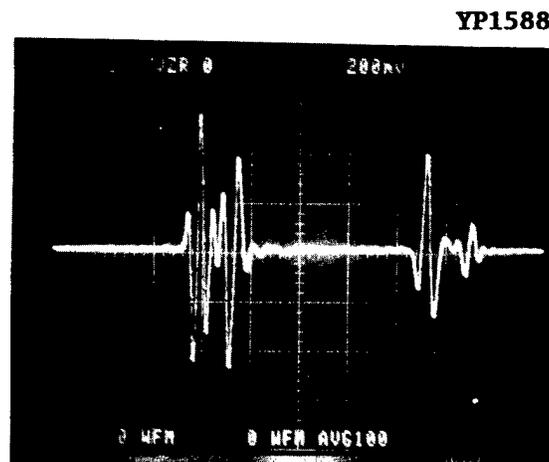


Fig. 13. Radio-frequency waveform of the ultrasonic signal scattered by the interface in tetragonal zirconia polycrystalline ceramic.

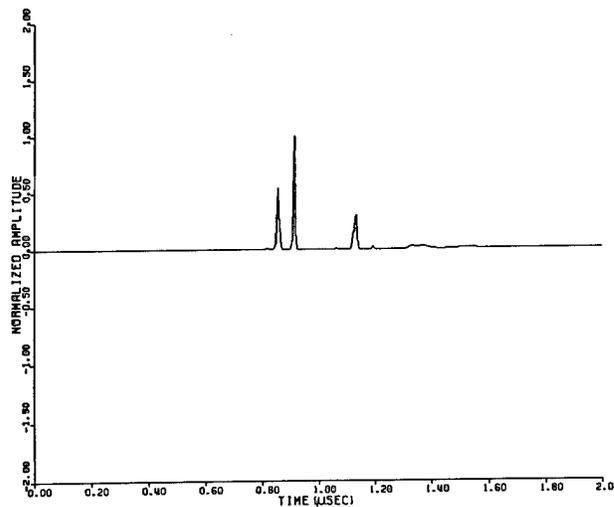


Fig 14. Processed data showing recovery of four interface signals in the bonded region of tetragonal zirconia polycrystalline ceramic.

delta function at the location of the PSZ-braze interface, indicating that the problem is failure of the braze to adhere to the ceramic.

These results indicate that for both samples, the central unbond occurs at the PSZ interface. For the specimen of Figs. 9 and 11, some of the edge indications are unbonded at the PSZ interface and some at the NCI interface.

Following NDE, the Materials Joining Group sectioned the sample of Figs. 9 and 11 through the unbonded region delineated by the central indication. When the region was cut out, the ceramic cap actually fell off. Subsequent metallographic examination of the ceramic-braze interface revealed the presence of extreme porosity, possibly due to trapped gas. The nondestructive results were thus validated.

Shear Specimens

Following examination of the piston-cap specimens, some smaller ceramic-metal brazements were made available. These samples were approximately 9-mm-square pieces of 3.5-mm-thick zirconia ceramic brazed to an NCI substrate with a 0.6-mm-thick titanium transition piece. In this case, however, the ceramic was a fine-grained TZP material that could support elastic waves at frequencies in excess of 100 MHz. In such

samples, effective focus could be maintained at depths up to 5 mm for these frequencies: accordingly, a 100-MHz focused transducer with a focal length of 25.4 mm in water was obtained to exploit this condition. At this frequency and with the transducer focused at the PSZ-braze interface, the signals from either side of the 60- μm braze layer could be resolved, even though these signals are separated by only about 30 ns. Therefore, we were able to gate selectively the signal from the TZP-braze interface for analysis. This signal is an indicator of the quality of the bond that exists between the braze filler metal and the TZP. Figure 15 shows two of the samples and Fig. 16 the results of scanning the bond region. In these gray-scale presentations, lighter areas indicate relatively better bonding while darker regions depict relatively poorer bonding. The sample on the right has numerous small regions where there is lack of bonding. These regions average perhaps 100 μm in diameter and are probably caused by bubbles of trapped gas in the braze material. The presence of these bubbles has been previously demonstrated by destructive analysis and inferred from examination of the fracture surface, but, until now, we have not been able to detect their presence nondestructively.

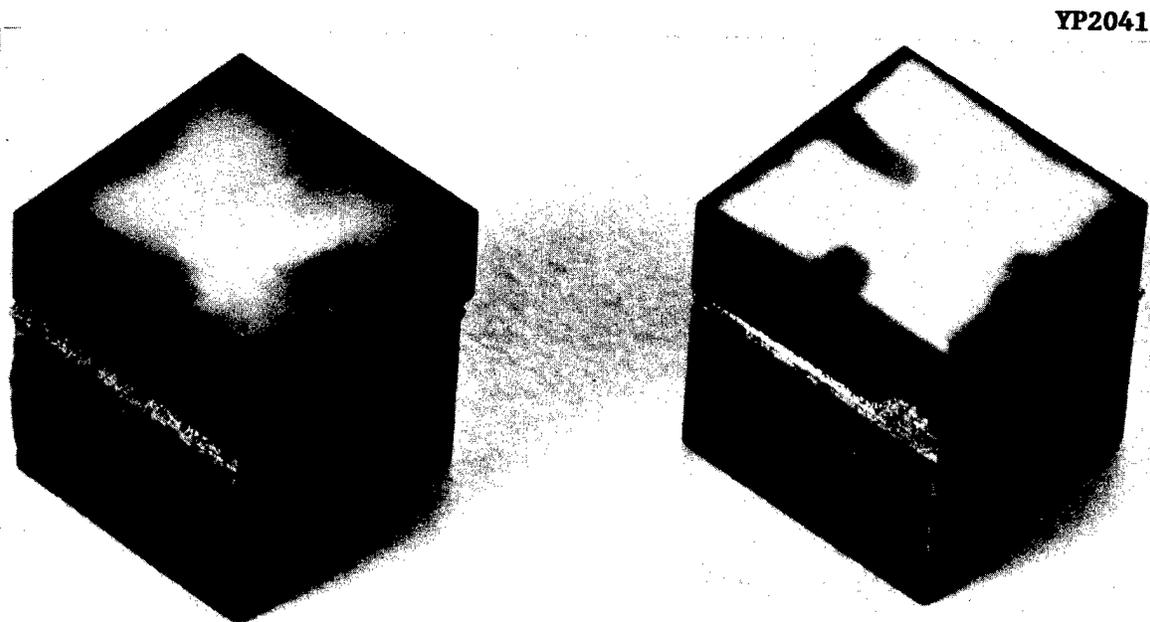


Fig. 15. Tetragonal zirconia polycrystalline ceramic joint specimens.

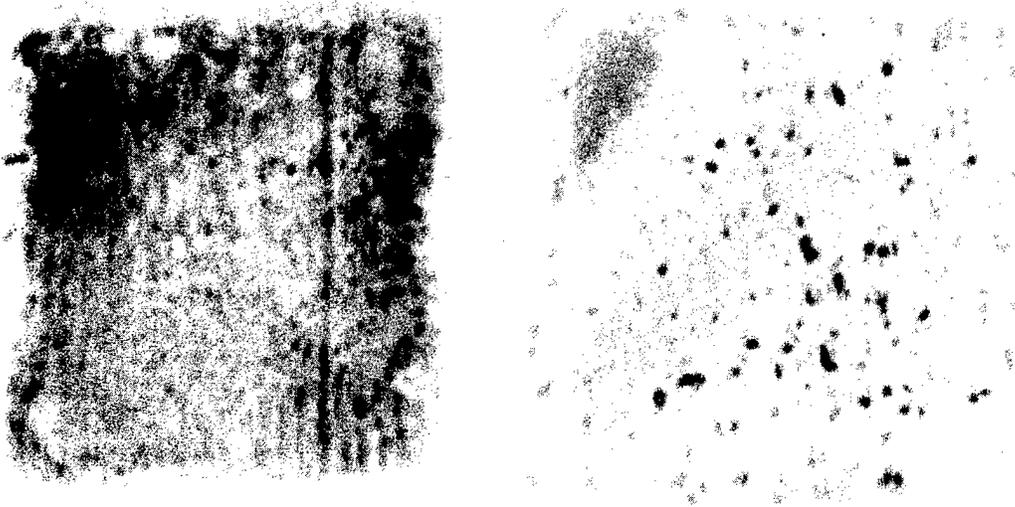


Fig. 16. Gray-scale presentation showing the detection of pores in the braze layers of the ceramic joint specimens shown in Fig. 15.

A diagonal band, running from lower left to upper right of the sample on the right, can be seen in the data of Fig. 16. The cause of this darkening is not known, but possibilities include the presence of microporosity or residual stress in the braze layer. The dark area in the upper left of the sample on the right is caused by severe thinning of the braze material.

The generally darker nature of the sample on the left in Fig. 16 is possibly attributable to use of a different grade of ceramic. Small variations in the acoustic properties alter the reflection coefficient at the TZP-braze interface and vary the average brightness of the reproduced data.

The sample on the left also exhibits a periodic variation in the interface that may be caused by machining marks on the TZP. No such marks are detectable on the visible surface, but they sometimes occur on one or more surfaces of the blanks.

The above results indicate that a great deal of information about the nature of the PSZ-braze bond can be gleaned from the ultrasonic scattering if the signals from the braze layer can be resolved. However, if they cannot, as is the case at typical ultrasonic frequencies (1-10 MHz), the signal generated by subtle variations at the filler metal-PSZ interface will be swamped by the signals from the filler metal-titanium interface.

Manufactured Flaws

We have considerable interest in determining the minimum detectable area of unbond in a ceramic joint. From the backscattering spectrum obtained from discrete flaws in ceramics, we earlier showed (see Fig. 5) the ability to infer a minimum measurable flaw size of about 25 μm (the minimum detectable flaw size will be still smaller) with our present system. It is difficult to fabricate discontinuities in this size range. However, we obtained a standard consisting of a bonded couple between a P-leg and an N-leg of a silicon-germanium thermoelectric sample. The bond contains three manufactured flaws having diameters of 250, 650, and 125 μm , and the acoustic properties (i.e., velocity and density) of the silicon-germanium are similar to those of typical ceramics. Figure 17

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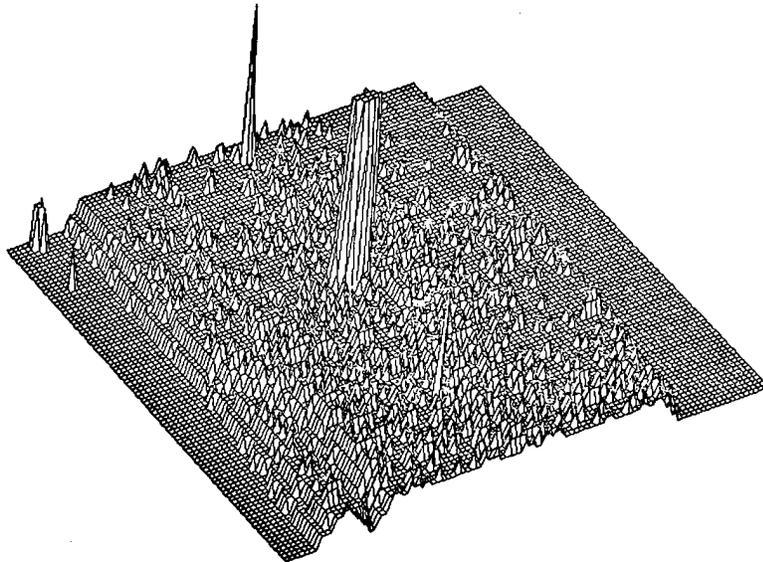


Fig. 17. Three-dimensional presentation of the ultrasonic detection of, left to right, 250-, 635-, and 125- μm flaws at the interface between two silicon-germanium thermoelectric samples.

is a pseudo three-dimensional view of the ultrasonic scattering from the bond line showing the detection of all three flaws. In the lower left of the figure is a natural crack that extended through the substrate and terminated at the interface. Figure 18 is a view of the data from a lower angle, making the smallest flaw more visible. Figure 19 is an expansion of the region around the 125- μm flaw. Note that the flaw signal is much larger than the background from the interface; thus, we should be able to see flaws considerably smaller than 125 μm reliably.

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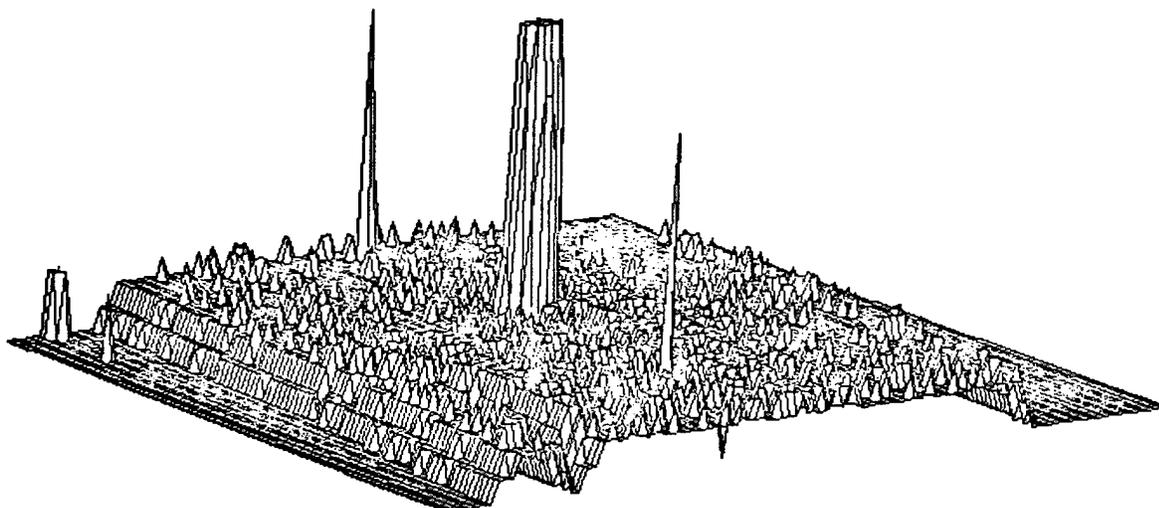


Fig. 18. Three-dimensional presentation (from a lower angle than in Fig. 17) of the ultrasonic detection of, left to right, 250-, 635-, and 125- μm flaws at the interface between the two silicon-germanium thermoelectric samples.

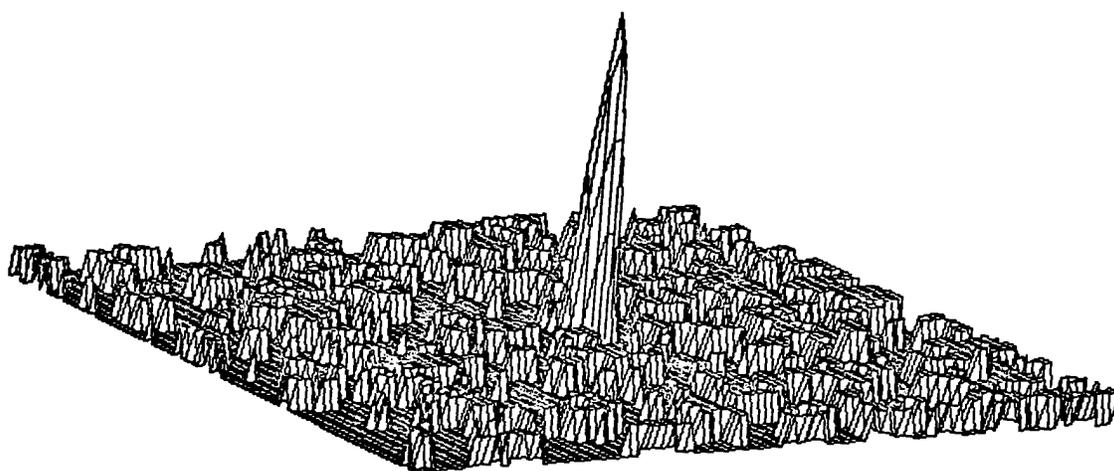


Fig. 19. Three-dimensional presentation of the region around the 125- μm flaw at the interface between the two silicon-germanium thermoelectric samples.

BUTT JOINTS

Lamb Wave Studies

For the samples described earlier in this report, the specimen geometry was such that bulk-wave probing of the joint region (albeit at frequencies far above those used in conventional ultrasonic testing) could be performed at normal incidence. We demonstrated earlier the ability to resolve signals from either side of the 60- μm -thick layer of brazing filler metal when the ultrasonic waves were incident normally on the joint. This capability then allowed us to determine whether a lack of bond occurred at the ceramic or metal interface of the joint and to measure the variation in filler metal thickness across the specimen.

For some specimen configurations, normal-incidence testing of the braze region using bulk waves is not possible. For example, a butt-braze joint between thin plates requires angle beams if bulk waves are used to interrogate the interface. While this configuration may or may not be important in the final application of ceramic joining to heat engines, it is of considerable importance to the development of joining technology in that many test specimens use such joint geometries. For example, specimens to measure flexural strength of ceramic-ceramic or ceramic-metal brazements are of this type (see Fig. 20), and inspection techniques must be developed so that correlations between NDE indications and mechanical properties can be determined. Only in this way can one differentiate between significant and ignorable indications.

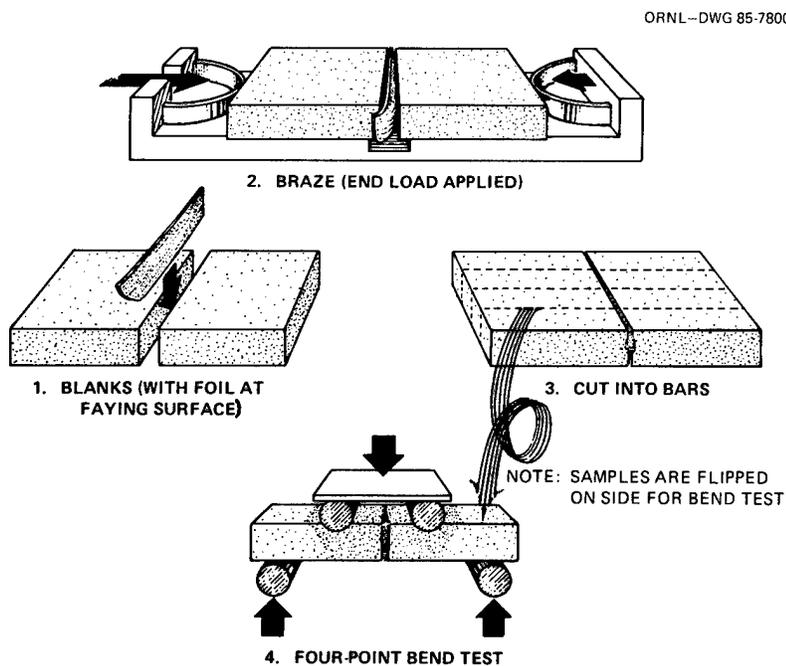


Fig. 20. Fabrication of ceramic flexure-strength specimens with butt-braze joints.

We have examined several butt-braze joints in $25.4 \times 14.2 \times 2.9$ mm alumina coupons using high-frequency angle-beam techniques. While this approach would appear to have considerable potential for evaluating bond quality, the results thus far have been more difficult to interpret than the results from normal-incidence tests, and they suffer from the fact that the focal point of the transducer cannot be maintained exactly on the bond across the full height of the joint. This test is also relatively slow, since the bond must be scanned using a small linear increment.

A second approach for evaluating bond quality in butt-joint specimens relies on measurement of the transmission coefficient of so-called plate or Lamb waves propagated through the bond. In this technique, a Lamb wave, which is the elastomechanical analog of guided electromagnetic waves, is excited on one side of the joint and the amplitude of the wave on the second side measured after propagation through the bond. This approach has the advantage of requiring scanning only along a single axis, making it much faster than conventional testing. The frequencies involved are also quite low, typically 1 to 5 MHz. The quantity determined by this measurement is the relative area of the bonded region, which has been related to the prediction of shear strength for spot welds in metals.⁵

As is the case for electromagnetic guided waves, Lamb waves are highly dispersive. Since the propagation of such a wave along a plate produces (microscopic) flexure of the plate, Lamb waves can produce either symmetric or antisymmetric modes according to the symmetry of the flexure with respect to the center line of the plate. Figures 21 and 22 show the calculated dispersion curves for the first four symmetric and antisymmetric modes in 2.9-mm-thick alumina. Since the ordinate gives the Lamb wave phase velocity (normalized by the shear wave velocity), it is also related to the angle of incidence necessary to generate the given Lamb mode. Thus a horizontal line will intersect the various possible modes, whose abscissas give the frequencies necessary to establish the modes at the indicated angle of incidence of the exciting energy.

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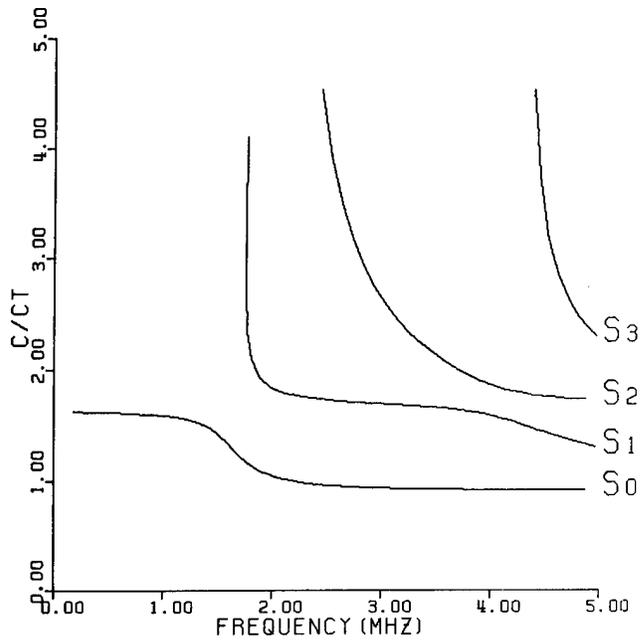


Fig. 21. Dispersion curves for symmetric Lamb wave modes in alumina.

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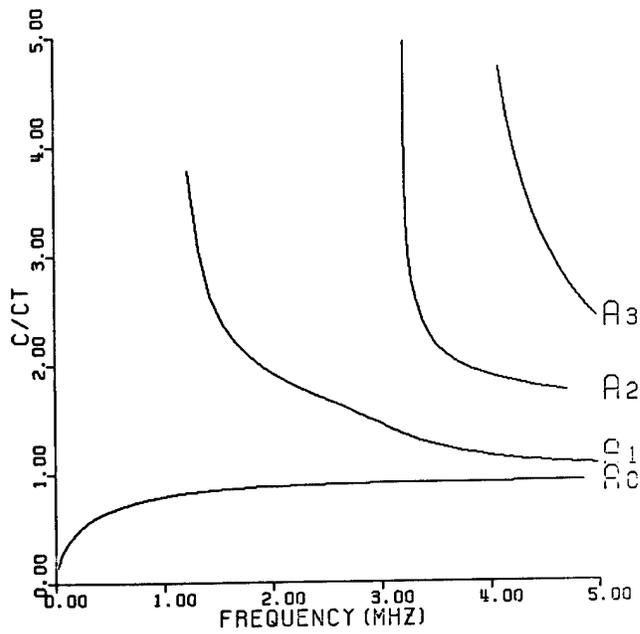


Fig. 22. Dispersion curves for antisymmetric Lamb wave modes in alumina.

Figure 23 is an experimental result showing the excitation of five Lamb wave modes in a 2.9-mm-thick alumina coupon. The normalized velocity of each wave is 1.25, and the mode frequencies are in good agreement with the values shown in Figs. 21 and 22. Note that this normalized velocity does not intersect the dispersion curve of the lowest-order antisymmetric mode; thus, this wave is not present in the spectrum. The relative amplitudes of the various waves are determined primarily by the response of the exciting transducer, which, in these studies, is a broadband 5-MHz unit.

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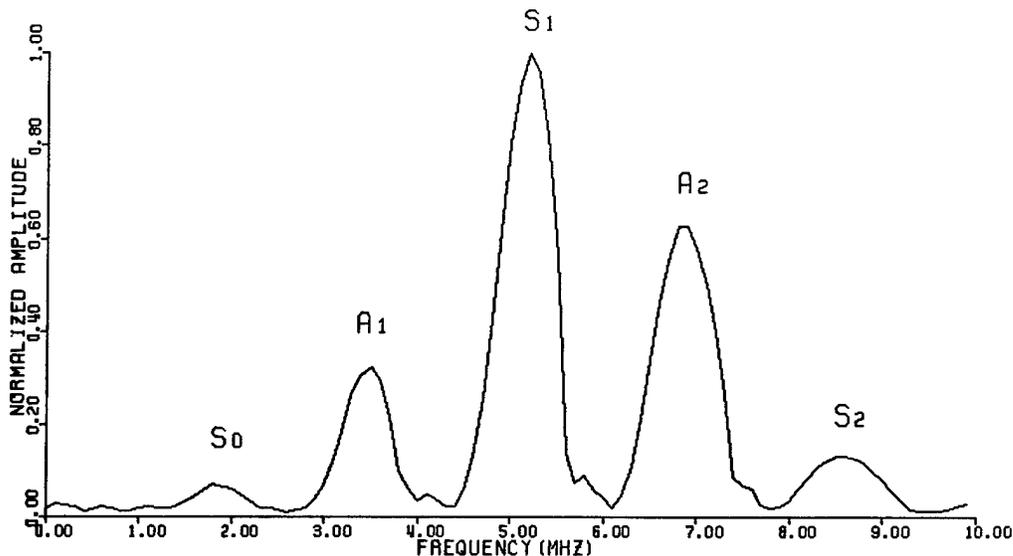


Fig. 23. Spectrum of Lamb wave modes in an alumina coupon.

A pure-mode response can be obtained by using single-frequency excitation of an appropriate transducer. Alternatively, one can use a relatively narrow-band transducer and select a normalized velocity (incident angle) such that only one mode exists within the passband of the transducer. Figure 24 shows the excitation of a single mode, the lowest-order symmetric mode, in an alumina coupon by a 2.25-MHz transducer using pulse excitation.

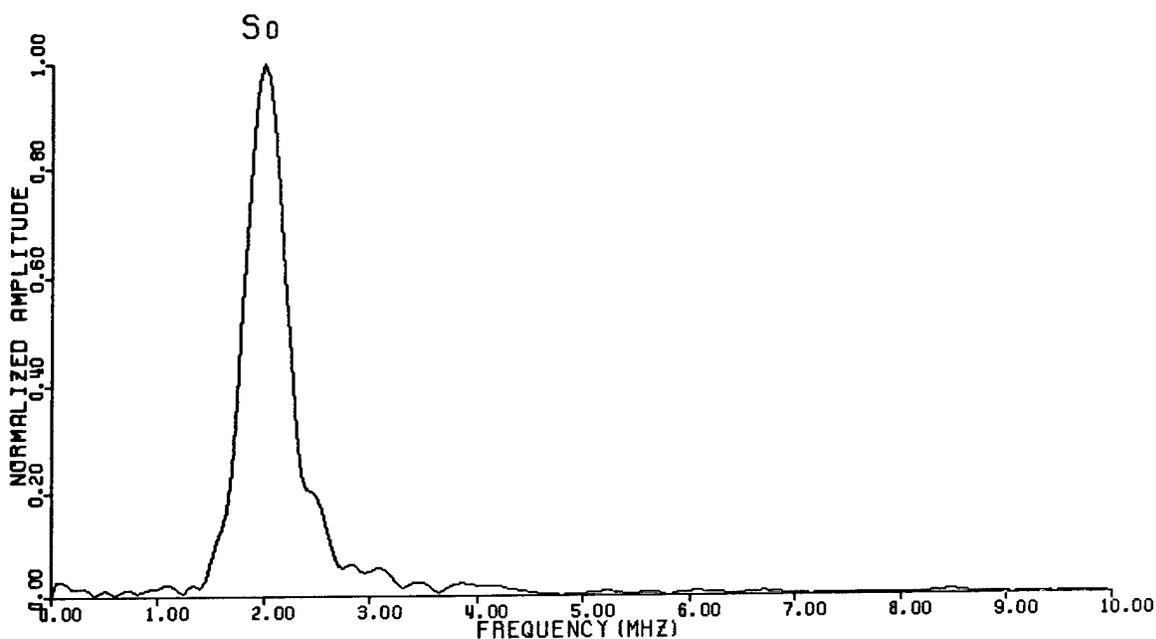


Fig. 24. Excitation of a single Lamb mode in an alumina coupon.

In order to test the effectiveness of using Lamb waves to interrogate the butt-braze joint in alumina flexure-strength specimens, the specially fabricated sample shown in Fig. 25 was made. A piece of tantalum foil at each end of the joint provides the proper separation of the ceramic halves during melting of the braze. A third piece of foil was placed in the center of this particular specimen to prevent bonding in that region and to simulate a nonbond of known dimensions. The brazing filler metal was one of several under development at Oak Ridge National Laboratory that will wet oxide ceramics directly with no pretreatment of the ceramic surface.

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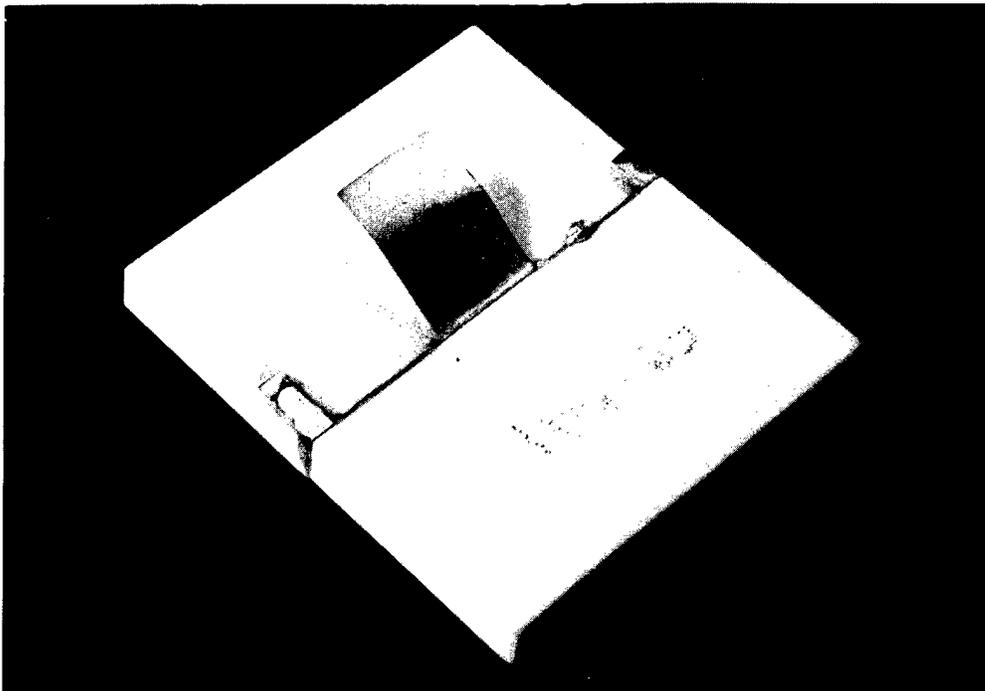


Fig. 25. Flexure-strength specimen containing a simulated nonbond.

The standard was first examined by conventional angle-beam through-transmission techniques using 25-MHz transducers. The joint was scanned in an x - y pattern using an index of $100\ \mu\text{m}$. As expected, the central nonbond was easily detected using both flat and focused transducers. For the latter, the sensitivity varied from top to bottom of the interface because of variations in the beam profile with depth. In both cases, however, numerous indications were generated at the top and bottom of the interface by a slight vertical misalignment of the ceramic coupons. This particular approach is sensitive to misalignment and is a disadvantage of angle-beam testing of butt joints.

We next examined the standard using Lamb waves. Two transducers were used with the transmitter and receiver located on opposite sides of the interface. Figure 26 shows the transducer configuration. The transmitter was driven with a tone burst to ensure excitation of a single Lamb mode.

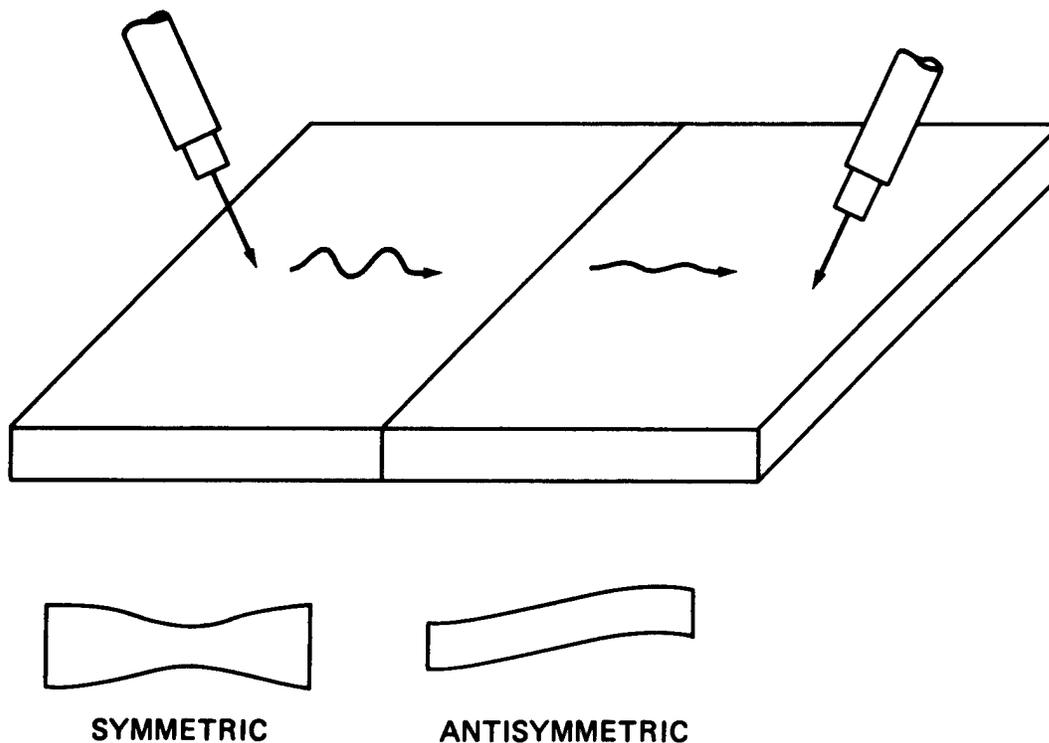


Fig. 26. Transducer configuration for excitation and detection of Lamb waves in the butt-brazed alumina coupon illustrated in Fig. 25.

As expected, virtually no change in transmission amplitude was detected when the transducers were translated perpendicularly to the joint. Nevertheless, an x-y scan (parallel and perpendicular to the interface) was made. The results are shown in Fig. 27, where the height of the surface represents the Lamb wave transmission amplitude. The central nonbond corresponds to the large dip in the surface. Obviously, a single scan parallel to the interface would have sufficed, so this test can be performed very rapidly.

A second butt-braze specimen was also available; it was a standard flexure bar consisting of titanium-coated PSZ coupons brazed with a commercial Ag-Cu-Sn filler metal. Only the two end pieces of tantalum foil were present in this sample. It was first tested by conventional angle-beam techniques with no indications detected other than the usual ones attributable to vertical misalignment of the ceramic plates. In particular, no regions of unbonding were found.

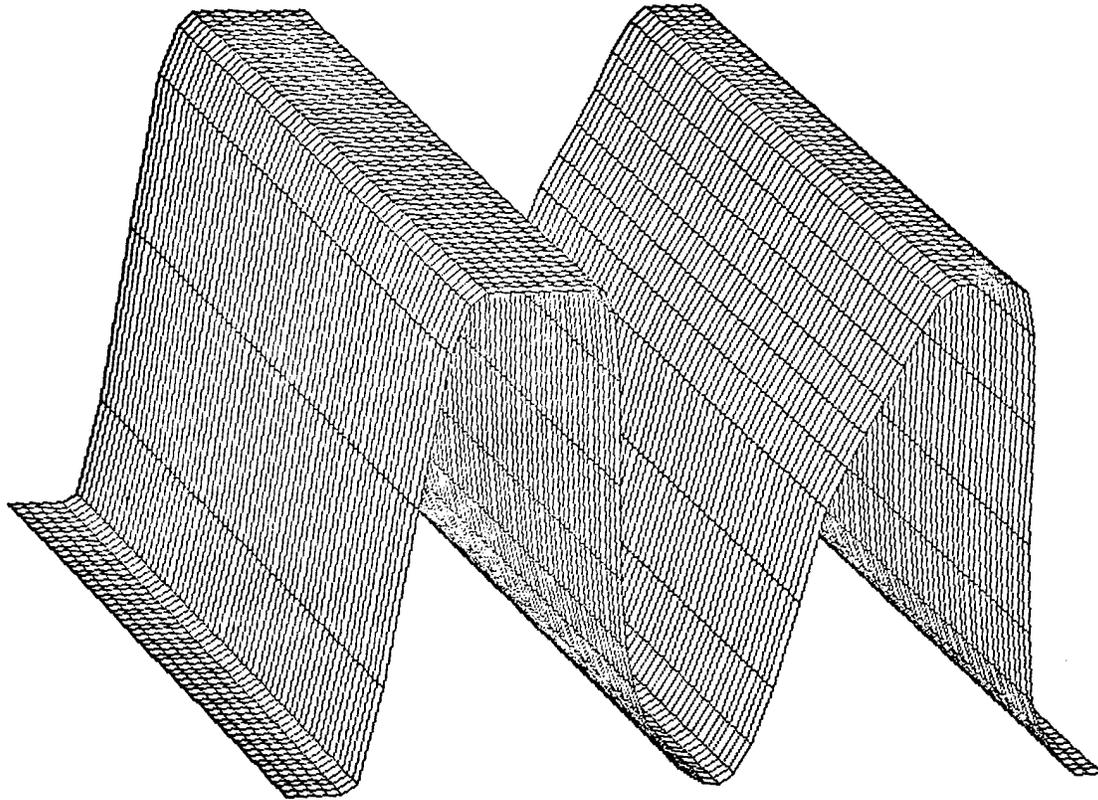


Fig. 27. Lamb wave transmission through the bond of the alumina flexure-strength specimen illustrated in Fig. 25, showing detection of the simulated nonbond.

Figure 28 shows the results obtained with Lamb waves on that second specimen. There is a small region near the center of the braze joint where the Lamb wave transmission dips noticeably. We then switched to a pulse-echo mode; that is, we monitored the amplitude of the Lamb waves reflected by the interface using first one and then the other transducer as a transmitter. In each case, an enhanced reflection was found at the location of the dip in Fig. 28. This eliminates problems in the ceramic (e.g., cracking) away from the interface as the source of the anomaly and establishes that some variation in the region of the interface engendered the signal.

Radiographic examination of the specimen revealed no detectable flaws in the interface.

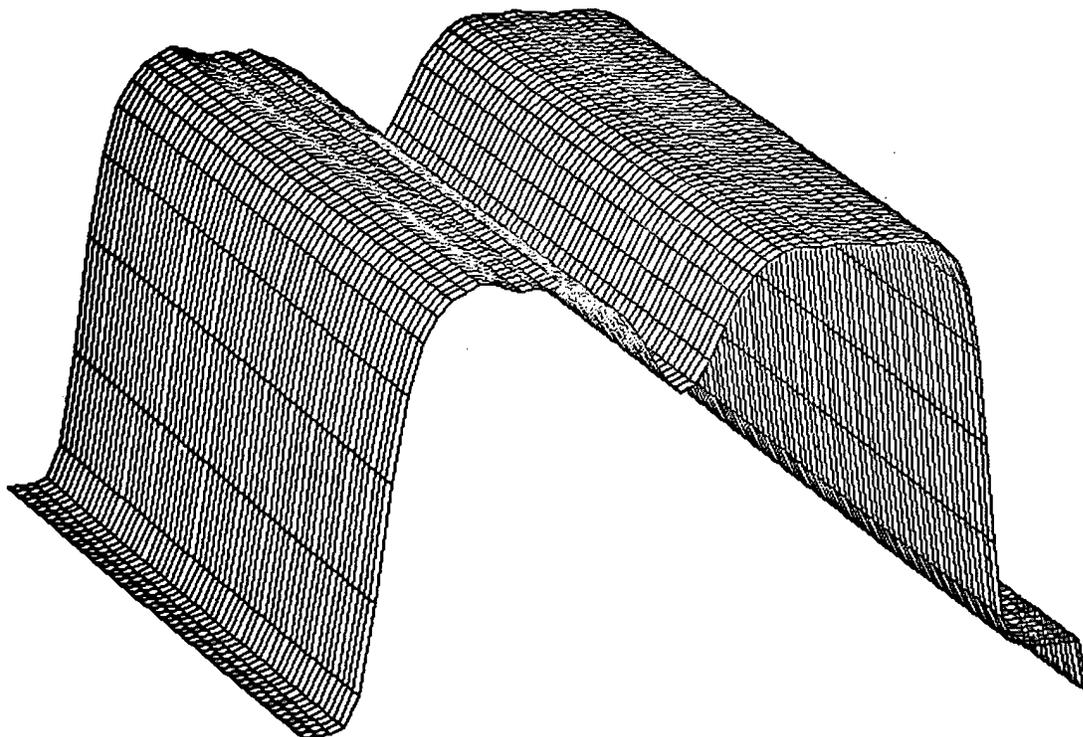


Fig. 28. Lamb wave transmission through the bond of another PSZ flexure-strength specimen having a simulated nonbond, showing a small indication near the center of the bond.

These results indicate that Lamb waves are sensitive to some characteristics of the braze joint that conventional nondestructive test techniques do not detect. The specimen will be cut into flexure bars and subjected to bend tests to try to develop a correlation between the inspection results and the strength of the bond.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The small critical flaw size in conventional monolithic structural ceramics has placed severe burdens on the development of ultrasonic NDE techniques for ensuring the integrity of parts fabricated of these materials. Since the detectability of a given flaw increases as the wavelength of the interrogating radiation decreases (at least until the wavelength becomes comparable to the flaw size), frequencies of at least 50 MHz are required to detect critical flaws in many ceramics. In addition, unlike structural metals, the interrogating ultrasonic radiation

must be focused in order to ensure that a sufficiently large fraction of the incident radiation is intercepted by the flaw. The necessity of introducing focused radiation through the surface of the ceramic part (mandated by the desire to have rapid scanning capability) leads to severe spherical aberration of the ultrasonic beam within the part and limits the depth to which critical flaws can be detected to a few millimeters. Within these constraints, however, we have had considerable success in detecting flaws in the critical size range.

Since a common flaw type in ceramics is a quasi-spherical void or inclusion, a model was discussed for the scattering of ultrasonic waves from spheres. This model was applied to scattering from natural flaws in partially stabilized zirconia, and a flaw diameter of about 25 μm was inferred.

Since the attenuation behavior of structural ceramics for ultrasonic waves is critical to determining the minimum detectable flaw size, a technique was developed that permits a material transfer curve, or attenuation versus frequency response, to be determined for any ceramic. This process corrects for all known material-independent losses, such as diffraction (beam spread), acoustic impedance mismatches at the surfaces of the part and at internal interfaces, and frequency-dependent coupling losses between the transducer and the surface of the part. The transfer curve is highly sensitive to changes in the microstructure of the ceramic, and examples of the differences in TZP and PSZ ceramics were given.

Since current heat engine designs contain components consisting of a ceramic material clad on a metallic substrate to achieve both high-temperature tolerance and toughness, additional evaluation techniques were required for assurance of the quality of a ceramic-metal bond. The braze layer in such a bond is typically of the order of 60 μm thick, and, if nonbonding occurs, the tester needs to determine which face of this layer is nonbonded. For high-frequency ceramics, this condition could be determined by interrogating the bond with frequencies sufficiently high (≈ 100 MHz) to resolve the layer thickness. Examples were given of the detection of 100- μm -diam pores in the braze layer using this approach. When the ceramic host would not support ultrasonic waves of such a high

frequency, however, advanced signal processing techniques had to be developed to recover the desired information. An example was given of the identification of the correct interface in a braze joint in PSZ.

Although no specimens were available for study that contained manufactured flaws of known size in the bond layer of a ceramic-to-metal joint, a sample containing such flaws at the interface between a P-leg and an N-leg of a silicon-germanium specimen was obtained. The detection of a 125- μm flaw was demonstrated, and the signal-to-noise ratio for this flaw indicates that considerably smaller flaws could be detected reliably.

In testing joints between ceramic coupons, it is often not possible to introduce the ultrasound at normal incidence to the bond because of specimen geometry. In such cases, angle-beam testing techniques can be used, but it is difficult to maintain transducer focus across the full width of the interface. In addition, angle-beam testing was found to be unduly sensitive to slight vertical misalignment of the two plates being joined. For these configurations, a second approach, one using plate or Lamb waves, was studied. Two transducers were used: one launches a Lamb wave in either plate of the specimen, and the second receives the wave in the other plate after propagation through the joint. The amplitude of the received wave is an indicator of the condition of the bond in the region between the transducers.

Dispersion curves for Lamb waves in alumina coupons were calculated, and a system was assembled for evaluation of the bond by these waves. The system was shown to detect a simulated nonbond easily, and inspection of a second sample by this technique revealed an indication in the bond area that was not detected by angle-beam testing.

While bonds between ceramic components and between ceramic and metallic parts present a number of difficult problems to the researcher, considerable progress has been made in developing techniques that will allow the integrity of these bonds to be assured nondestructively. Many problems remain, however. Perhaps the most common criticism directed at ceramic inspection is that it is slow in comparison with inspection of metals. Rarely is it noted, however, that most ceramic inspection systems do not approach the state of the art in data acquisition rates. This is understandable, since technique development is of more importance at the

present time in ceramic evaluation than it is for metals, where the techniques have a long history of development. Inspection rates will undoubtedly increase for ceramic evaluation as the approaches become established.

A more fundamental limitation in ceramic or ceramic-joint evaluation is related to the requirement for focused radiation. The severe aberrations introduced into the beam by propagation through the sample surface limit the depth to which effective focus can be maintained. This depth can be increased somewhat by increasing transducer frequency and focal length, but the relationship does not appear to favor this approach. Some form of this limitation will likely persist in the foreseeable future.

The techniques presented here do not exhaust the potential tools for ceramic-joint evaluation by a wide margin. For example, some form of direct interface wave (i.e., a wave that propagates in the bond material but not in the ceramic) may possibly yield information about the strength of the bond itself. This result would indeed be valuable, since there is currently no known correlation between bond strength and measurable acoustic properties.

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University Park, PA 16802
146. Nabil S. Hakim
Staff Research Engineer,
Engineering R&D
General Motors Corporation
Detroit Diesel Allison
Division
36880 Ecorse Road
Romulus, MI 48174
147. John W. Halloran
Ceramic Process Systems
128 Spring Street
Lexington, MA 02173
148. R. A. Harmon
25 Schalren Drive
Latham, NY 12110
149. Stephen D. Hartline
Norton Company
High Performance Ceramics
Goddard Road
Northboro, MA 01532
150. Willard E. Hauth
Section Manager, Composite
Development Ceramics Program
Dow Corning Corporation
Midland, MI 48640

151. Norman L. Hecht
University of Dayton Research
Institute
300 College Park
Dayton, OH 45469-0001
152. S. S. Hecker
Deputy Division Leader
Material Science and Technology
Division, G-756
Los Alamos National Laboratory
PO Box 1663
Los Alamos, NM 87545
153. Peter W. Heitman
General Motors Corporation
Allison Gas Turbine Operations
PO Box 420, W-5
Indianapolis, IN 46206-0420
154. Richard L. Helferich
The Duriron Company, Inc.
PO Box 1145
Dayton, OH 45401
155. H. E. Helms
General Motors Corporation
Allison Gas Turbine Operations
PO Box 420
Indianapolis, IN 46206-0420
156. Thomas L. Henson
Director of Research and
Engineering
Chemical & Metallurgical
Division
GTE Products Corporation
Hawes Street
Towanda, PA 18848-0504
157. Thomas P. Herbell
NASA Lewis Research Center
21000 Brookpark Road
MS 105-1
Cleveland, OH 44135
158. Ben Heshmatpour
Thermo Electron Corporation
101 First Avenue
Waltham, MA 02154
159. Hendrik Heystek
Bureau of Mines
Tuscaloosa Research Center
PO Box L
University, AL 35486
160. Robert V. Hillery
Manager, Coating Materials
and Processes
General Electric Company
Cincinnati, OH 45215
161. Jonathan W. Hinton
Vice President and
General Manager
Structural Ceramics Division
Standard Oil Engineered
Materials
PO Box 1054
Niagara Falls, NY 14302
162. James C. Holzwarth
General Motors Research
Laboratories
2629 Saturn Drive Lake
Orion, MI 48035
163. Stephen M. Hsu
Chief, Ceramics Division
Institute for Materials
Science & Engineering
National Bureau of Standards
Gaithersburg, MD 20899
164. Harold A. Huckins, President
Princeton Advanced
Technology, Inc.
56 Finley Road
Princeton, NJ 08540
165. Joseph E. Hunter, Jr.
General Motors Corporation
Research Labs, Metallurgy
Department
12 Mile and Mound Roads
Warren, MI 48090-9055
166. Louis C. Ianniello
Director, Office of Materials
Sciences
Department of Energy
ER-13 GTN
Washington, DC 20545

167. Robert H. Insley
Champion Spark Plug Company
Ceramic Division
20000 Conner Avenue
Detroit, MI 48234
168. Curt A. Johnson
General Electric Company
Physical Chemistry Laboratory
PO Box 8
Schenectady, NY 12301
169. Douglas C. Johnson
Technology Development Manager
Sundstrand Corporation
Turbomach Division
4400 Ruffin Road, PO Box 85757
San Diego, CA 92138-5757
170. Larry Johnson, Director
Center for Transportation Research
Argonne National Laboratory
9700 S. Cass Avenue, Building 362
Argonne, IL 60439
171. R. A. Johnson
General Motors Corporation
Allison Gas Turbine Division
PO Box 420
Indianapolis, IN 46206-0420
172. L. A. Joo
Associate Director of Research
Great Lakes Research Corporation
PO Box 1031
Elizabethton, TN 37643
173. A. David Joseph
Vice President, R&D Engineering
Sealed Power Corporation
100 Terrace Plaza
Muskegon, MI 49443
174. Roy Kamo, President
Adiabatics, Inc.
630 S. Mapleton
Columbus, IN 47201
175. Allan Katz
Air Force Wright
Aeronautical Laboratory
Materials Laboratory, AFWAL/MLLM
Metals and Ceramics Division
Wright-Patterson Air Force Base
OH 45433
176. R. N. Katz
Chief, Ceramics Research
Division
U.S. Army Materials
Technology Laboratory
Arsenal Street
Watertown, MA 02172
177. Frank N. Kelley
Director
Institute of Polymer Science
The University of Akron
Akron, OH 44325
178. P. Victor Kelsey
Ceramics Technical Leader
Materials Science Division
Aluminum Company of America
Alcoa Technical Center B
Alcoa Center, PA 15061
179. Frederick L. Kennard, III
Supervisor, Ceramic Research
General Motors Corporation
AC Spark Plug Division,
Dept. 32-24
1300 N. Dort Highway
Flint, MI 48556
180. J. R. Kidwell
AGT101 Assistant Project
Engineer
Garrett Turbine Engine Company
111 S. 34th Street
PO Box 5217
Phoenix, AZ 85010
181. Max Klein
Senior Scientist
Thermodynamics
Gas Research Institute
8600 West Bryn Mawr Avenue
Chicago, IL 60631
182. C. E. Knapp
Norton Company
8001 Daly Street
Niagara Falls, Ontario
Canada
183. A. S. Kobayashi
University of Washington
Dept. of Mechanical Engineering
MS FU10
Seattle, WA 98195

184. James F. Kolbe
Group Vice President
Product Development and
Engineering Services Group
Sealed Power Corporation
100 Terrace Plaza
Muskegon, MI 49443
185. David M. Kotchick
AiResearch Manufacturing Company
2525 W. 190th Street
Torrance, CA 90509
186. Bruce Kramer
George Washington University
Aerodynamic Center, Room T715
Washington, DC 20052
187. Saunders B. Kramer
Manager, AGT Program
Office of Transportation Systems
Department of Energy
Forrestal Building CE-151
1000 Independence Avenue
Washington, DC 20585
188. D. M. Kreiner
AGT101 Project Manager
Garrett Turbine Engine Company
111 S. 34th Street, PO Box 5217
Phoenix, AZ 85010
189. Pieter Krijgsman
Ceramic Design Int. Hold., Ltd.
PO Box 68
8050 AB Hattem
The Netherlands
190. W. J. Lackey
Georgia Tech Research Institute
Energy and Materials Sciences
Laboratory
Georgia Institute of Technology
Atlanta, GA 30332
191. Everett A. Lake
Air Force Wright
Aeronautical Laboratory
AFWAL/POOS
Wright-Patterson Air Force Base
OH 45433
192. James Lankford
Department of Materials
Sciences
Southwest Research Institute
6220 Culebra Road
PO Drawer 28510
San Antonio, TX 78284
193. John G. Lanning
Corning Glass Works
Advanced Engine Components
HP-BB-2
Corning, NY 14830
194. David C. Larsen
Corning Glass Works
Materials Research
Department
Sullivan Park, FR-51
Corning, NY 14831
195. Patrick Lauzon
Ontario Research Foundation
Glass and Ceramics Centre
Materials Division
Sheridan Park Research
Community
Mississauga, Ontario
Canada L5K 1B3
196. Harry A. Lawler
Senior Product Specialist
Structural Ceramics Division
Standard Oil Engineered
Materials Company
PO Box 1054, Bldg. 91-2
Niagara Falls, NY 14302
197. Alan Lawley
Drexel University
Materials Engineering
Philadelphia, PA 19104
198. Daniel Lee
Temescon
2850 7th Street
Berkeley, CA 94710

199. June-Gunn Lee
Head, Refractory Materials
Korea Advanced Institute of
Science and Technology
PO Box 131, Dong Dae Mun
Seoul
Korea
200. E. M. Lenoë
Office of Naval Research
Air Force Office of
Scientific Research
Liaison Office, Far East
APO San Francisco, CA 96503-0110
201. Stanley R. Levine
NASA Lewis Research Center
21000 Brookpark Road
Cleveland, OH 44135
202. David Lewis
Naval Research Laboratory
Code 6360, Materials Science and
Technology Division
4555 Overlook Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20375
203. Winston W. Liang
Director of Program Development
Amercom, Inc.
8948 Fullbright Avenue
Chatsworth, CA 91311
204. Bill Long
Babcock and Wilcox
PO Box 1260
Lynchburg, VA 24505
205. L. A. Lott
EG&G, Inc.
Idaho National Engineering
Laboratory
PO Box 1625
Idaho Falls, ID 83415
206. Bryan K. Luftglass
Staff Consultant
Chem Systems, Inc.
303 S. Broadway
Tarrytown, NY 10591
207. Michael J. Lynch
General Electric Company
Medical Systems Group
PO Box 414, 7B-36
Milwaukee, WI 53201
208. Vincent L. Magnotta
Senior Principal Development
Engineer
Technical Diversification
R&D Dept.
Air Products and Chemicals, Inc.
PO Box 538
Allentown, PA 18105
209. Tai-il Mah
Technical Manager, Ceramics
and Composites Research
Universal Energy Systems
4401 Dayton-Xenia Road
Dayton, OH 45432
210. L. Manes
Material Scientist
Division of Prospective
Studies and Knowledge
Transfer
Commission of the European
Communities
Joint Research Centre
Ispra Establishment
1-21020 Ispra (Varese)
Italy
211. Gerald R. Martin
Manager, Technology
Fleetguard, Inc.
Cookeville, TN 38501
212. John Mason
Vice President, Engineering
The Garrett Corporation
9851 Sepulveda Boulevard
PO Box 92248
Los Angeles, CA 90009
213. J. McCauley
U.S. Army Materials Technology
Laboratory
DRXMR-MC
Arsenal Street
Watertown, MA 02172

214. Robert R. McDonald
President
Boride Products
2879 Aero Park Drive
Traverse City, MI 49684
215. William J. McDonough
Department of Energy
Office of Transportation Systems
Forrestal Building CE-151
1000 Independence Avenue
Washington, DC 20585
216. Thomas D. McGee
Iowa State University
Department of Materials Science
and Engineering
Ames, IA 50011
217. Malcolm G. McLaren
Head, Department of Ceramics
Rutgers University
Busch Campus
Bowser Road, Box 909
Piscataway, NJ 08854
218. Arthur F. McLean
Manager, Ceramics Materials
Department
Ford Motor Company
20000 Rotunda Drive
Dearborn, MI 48121
219. Brian L. Mehosky
Development Engineer, R&D
Standard Oil Engineered
Materials
4440 Warrensville Center Rd.
Cleveland, OH 44128
220. P. K. Mehrotra
Kennametal, Inc.
PO Box 639
Greensburg, PA 15601
221. Joseph J. Meindl
Reynolds International, Inc.
PO Box 27002
6603 W. Broad St.
Richmond, VA 23261
222. D. Messier
U.S. Army Materials
Technology Laboratory
DRXMR-MC
Arsenal Street
Watertown, MA 02172
223. Arthur G. Metcalfe
Director
Research Department
Solar Turbines, Inc.
2200 Pacific Highway
PO Box 80966
San Diego, CA 92138
224. Thomas N. Meyer
Senior Technical Specialist
Alumina, Chemicals and
Ceramics Division
Aluminum Company of America
Alcoa Technical Center
Alcoa Center, PA 15069
225. W. Miloscia
Standard Oil Engineered
Materials
Research and Development
4440 Warrensville Center Rd.
Cleveland, OH 44128
226. Bill Moehle
Ethyl Corporation
451 Florida Blvd.
Ethyl Tower
Baton Rouge, LA 70801
227. Helen Moeller
Babcock and Wilcox
PO Box 11165
Lynchburg, VA 24506
228. Thomas Morel
Vice President
Integral Technologies Inc.
415 E. Plaza Drive
Westmont, IL 60559
229. Frederick E. Moreno, President
Turbo Energy Systems, Inc.
350 Second Street, Suite 5
Los Altos, CA 94022

230. Peter E. D. Morgan
Member Technical Staff
Structural Ceramics
Rockwell International
Science Center
1049 Camino Dos Rios
PO Box 1085
Thousand Oaks, CA 91360
231. Solomon Musikant
General Electric Company
Space Systems Division
PO Box 8555, Mail Stop U-1219
Philadelphia, PA 19101
232. Pero Nannelli
Pennwalt Corporation
900 First Avenue, PO Box C
King of Prussia, PA 19406-0018
233. Robert M. Neilson, Jr.
EG&G Idaho, Inc.
Materials Research
PO Box 1625
Idaho Falls, ID 83415
234. Dale E. Niesz
Manager, Materials
Department
Battelle Columbus
Laboratories
505 King Avenue
Columbus, OH 43201
235. Dick Nixdorf
Vice President
American Matrix, Inc.
118 Sherlake Drive
Knoxville, TN 37922
236. Norton Company
HPC Library/D. M. Jacques
Goddard Road
Northboro, MA 01532-1545
237. W. Richard Ott
New York State College of
Ceramics
Alfred University
Alfred, NY 14802
238. Muktesh Paliwal
GTE Products Corporation
Hawes Street
Towanda, PA 18848
239. Hayne Palmour III
North Carolina State
University
Engineering Research
Services Division
2158 Burlington Engineering
Laboratories
PO Box 5995
Raleigh, NC 27607
240. Joseph N. Panzarino
Norton Company
Director, R&D, High Performance
Ceramics
Goddard Road
Northboro, MA 01532-1545
241. Pellegrino Papa
Manager, Technical and Business
Development
Corning Technical Products
Division
Corning, NY 14831
242. James G. Paschal
Chemical Sales, Regional Manager
Reynolds Metals Company
PO Box 76154
Atlanta, GA 30358
243. Arvid E. Pasto
Member of Technical Staff
Precision Materials Technology
GTE Laboratories, Inc.
40 Sylvan Road
Waltham, MA 02254
244. James W. Patten
Director, Materials Engineering
Cummins Engine Company, Inc.
Box 3005, Mail Code 50183
Columbus, IN 47201

245. Robert A. Penty
Development Engineer
Manufacturing Technology Dept.
Apparatus Division
Eastman Kodak Company
901 Elmgrove Road
Rochester, NY 14650
246. Gary R. Peterson
U.S. Department of Energy
Idaho Operations Office
785 DOE Place
Idaho Falls, ID 83402
247. Dan Petrak
Babcock and Wilcox
PO Box 1260
Lynchburg, VA 24505
248. R. Byron Pipes
University of Delaware
Center for Composite
Materials
2001 Spencer Laboratory
Newark, DE 19716
249. Robert C. Pohanka
Office of Naval Research
800 N. Quincy Street
Code 431
Arlington, VA 22217
250. Stephen C. Pred
Product Manager
ICD Group, Inc.
641 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10022
251. Karl M. Prewo
United Technologies Corp.
Research Center
Silver Lane, MS 24
East Hartford, CT 06108
252. Hubert B. Probst
Chief Scientist, Materials
Div., MS
NASA Lewis Research Center
21000 Brookpark Road
Cleveland, OH 44135
253. Carr Lane Quackenbush
Norton Company
High Performance Ceramics
Goddard Road
Northboro, MA 01532-1545
254. George Quinn
U.S. Army Materials
Technology Laboratory
Arsenal Street
Watertown, MA 02172
255. Dennis T. Quinto
Kennametal, Inc.
Phillip M. McKenna
Laboratory
PO Box 639
Greensburg, PA 15601
256. S. Venkat Raman
Manager, New Technology
Marketing
Contract Research Dept.
Air Products and Chemicals, Inc.
PO Box 538
Allentown, PA 18105
257. Dennis Readey
Department Chairman
Ceramic Engineering
Ohio State University
2041 College Road
Columbus, OH 43210
258. Robert R. Reeber
U.S. Army Research Office
PO Box 12211
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709
259. K. L. Reifsnider
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University
Department of Engineering
Science and Mechanics
Blacksburg, VA 24061

260. Paul Rempes
Champion Spark Plug Company
Ceramic Division
20000 Conner Avenue
Detroit, MI 48234
261. T. M. Resetar
U.S. Army Materials
Technology Laboratory
DRXMR-MC
Arsenal Street
Watertown, MA 02472
262. K. T. Rhee
Rutgers University
College of Engineering
PO Box 909
Piscataway, NJ 08854
263. Roy W. Rice
W. R. Grace and Company
7379 Route 32
Columbus, MD 21044
264. David W. Richerson
Ceramatec, Inc.
163 West 1700 South
Salt Lake City, UT 84115
265. Paul Rieth
Ferro Corporation
661 Willet Road
Buffalo, NY 14218
266. Michael A. Rigdon
Institute for Defense
Analyses
1801 Beauregard Street
Alexandria, VA 22=11
267. John E. Ritter, Jr.
University of Massachusetts
Mechanical Engineering
Department
Amherst, MA 01003
268. Giulio A. Rossi
Norton Company
High Performance Ceramics
Goddard Road
Northboro, MA 01532-1545
269. Barry R. Rossing
Aluminum Company of America
Alcoa Technical Center
Alcoa Center, PA 15069
270. David J. Rowcliffe
SRI International
Menlo Park, CA 94025
271. Donald W. Roy
Manager, Carbide and
Optical Material
Research and Development
Golden, CO 80401
272. Bruce Rubinger
50 Milk Street, 15th Floor
Boston, MA 02109
273. Robert Ruh
Air Force Wright
Aeronautical Laboratory
Materials Laboratory
AFWAL/MLLM
Metals and Ceramics
Division
Wright-Patterson AFB,
OH 45433
274. Robert J. Russell, Sr.
Divisional Vice President
Technology and Planning
High Performance Ceramics
Norton Company
Goddard Street
Northboro, MA 01532-1545
275. George P. Safol
Westinghouse Electric
Corporation
R&D Center
Pittsburgh, PA 15235

276. J. Sankar
North Carolina Agricultural and
Technical State University
Department of Mechanical
Engineering
Greensboro, NC 27411
277. Maxine Savitz
Assistant to Vice President,
Engineering
The Garrett Corporation
PO Box 92248
Los Angeles, CA 90009
278. Richard Schapery
Texas A&M University
Civil Engineering Department
College Station, TX 77843
279. J. L. Schienle
Garrett Turbine Engine Company
111 S. 34th Street
Phoenix, AZ 85034
280. L. J. Schioler
Aerojet Tech Systems Company
PO Box 13222
Dept. 9990, Bldg. 2001
Sacramento, CA 95813
281. Arnie Schneck
Deere and Company
PO Box 128
Wood-Ridge, NJ 07075
282. Matthew Schreiner
Gas Research Institute
8600 W. Bryn Mawr Avenue
Chicago, IL 60631
283. John Schuldies
Industrial Ceramic
Technology, Inc.
141 Enterprise Drive
Ann Arbor, MI 48103
284. R. B. Schulz, Manager
Advanced Materials
Development
Office of Transportation
Systems
Department of Energy
Forrestal Building CE-151
1000 Independence Avenue
Washington, DC 20585
285. Wesley J. C. Schuster
President
Thermo Electron Corporation
Metals Division
115 Eames Street
PO Box 340
Wilmington, MA 01887
286. Murray A. Schwartz
Bureau of Mines
2401 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20241
287. Douglas B. Schwarz
Dow Chemical U.S.A.
52 Building
Midland, MI 48674
288. Thomas M. Sebestyen
U.S. Army Tank-Automotive
Command
AMSTA-RGRT
Warren, MI 48397-5000
289. Brian Seegmiller
Senior Development Engineer
Coors Porcelain Company
17750 North 32 Street
Golden, CO 80401
290. S. G. Seshadri
Research Associate
Standard Oil Engineered Materials
Company
Niagara Falls R&D Center
PO Box 832
Niagara Falls, NY 14302

291. Peter T. B. Shaffer
Executive Vice President
Advanced Refractory Technologies,
Inc.
699 Hertel Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14207
292. Maurice E. Shank
Director, Engineering Technology
Assessment
United Technologies Corporation
Pratt and Whitney Engrg. Div.
MS 162-31
East Hartford, CT 06108
293. Laurel M. Sheppard
Associate Editor
Advanced Materials and Processes
Route 87
Metals Park, OH 44073
294. Dinesh K. Shetty
The University of Utah
Dept. of Materials Science and
Engineering
Salt Lake City, UT 84112
295. Jack D. Sibold
Coors Porcelain Company
17750 North 32 Street
Golden, CO 80401
296. Neal Sigmon
Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Interior and
Related Events
U.S. House of Representatives
Rayburn Building, Room B308
Washington, DC 20515
297. Richard Silbergliitt
DHR, Inc.
6849 Old Dominion Drive
Suite 228
McLean, VA 22101
298. Maurice J. Sinnott
University of Michigan
Chemical and Metallurgical
Engineering
438 W. Engineering Building
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
299. S. R. Skaggs
Los Alamos National
Laboratory
PO Box 1663
MS F-682, Program Office
Los Alamos, NM 87545
300. J. Thomas Smith
Director, Precision
Materials Tech.
GTE Laboratories, Inc.
40 Sylvan Road
Waltham, MA 02254
301. Jay R. Smyth
Senior Development Specialist
Garrett Turbine Engine
Company
PO Box 5217
MS 93-172/1302-2K
Phoenix, AZ 85010
302. Rafal Sobotowski
Standard Oil Engineered
Materials
Research and Development
3092 Broadway Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44115
303. Boyd W. Sorenson
E. I. DuPont de Nemours
& Company
Textile Fibers Dept. -
E304C123
Wilmington, DE 19898

304. Richard M. Spriggs
National Materials Advisory
Board
National Research Council
2101 Constitution Avenue
Washington, DC 20418
305. John D. Spuller
Division Manager
Government Products
Deere and Company
John Deere Road
Moline, IL 61265
306. M. Srinivasan
Standard Oil Engineered
Materials
Niagara Falls R&D Center
PO Box 832
Niagara Falls, NY 14302
307. Gordon L. Starr
Manager, Metallic/Ceramic
Materials Dept.
Cummins Engine Company, Inc.
Box 3005, Mail Code 50183
Columbus, IN 47202-3005
308. Harold L. Stocker
Manager, Low Heat Rejection
Program
General Motors Corporation
Allison Gas Turbine Operations
PO Box 420, T-23
Indianapolis, IN 46206-0420
309. Roger Storm
Director, Niagara Falls R&D
Center
Standard Oil Engineered Materials
Company
PO Box 832
Niagara Falls, NY 14302
310. E. E. Strain
Program Manager AGT-101
Garrett Turbine Engine Company
111 S. 34th Street
PO Box 5217, Mail Stop 301-2N
Phoenix, AZ 85010
311. Thomas N. Strom
NASA Lewis Research Center
21000 Brookpark Road, 77-6
Cleveland, OH 44135
312. Paul Sutor
Midwest Research Institute
425 Volker Blvd.
Kansas City, MO 64116
313. J. J. Swab
U.S. Army Materials
Technology Laboratory
Arsenal Street
Watertown, MA 02172
314. Lewis Swank
Ford Motor Company
PO Box 2053
Building SRL, Room E3172
Dearborn, MI 48121
315. Anthony C. Taylor
Staff Director
Subcommittee on
Transportation, Aviation,
& Materials
Committee on Science and
Technology
U.S. House of Representatives
Rayburn Building, Room 2321
Washington, DC 20515
316. W. H. Thielbahr
Chief, Energy Programs
Branch
Department of Energy
Idaho Operations Office
550 2nd Street
Idaho Falls, ID 83401
317. Earl Thompson
Assistant Director
United Technologies Corporation
Research Center
Silver Lane
East Hartford, CT 06108
318. John K. Tien
Director of Center for
Strategic Materials
Columbia University
1137 SW Mudd Building
New York, NY 10027

319. T. Y. Tien
University of Michigan
Materials and Metallurgical
Engineering
Dow Building
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2136
320. Julian M. Tishkoff
Research
Directorate of Aerospace
Sciences
Bolling AFB
Washington, DC 20332
321. Maurice L. Torti
Senior Scientist, High Performance
Ceramics
Norton Company
Goddard Road
Northboro, MA 01532-1545
322. Louis E. Toth
National Science Foundation
Division of Materials Research
1800 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20550
323. Richard E. Tressler
Chairman, Ceramic Science and
Engineering Department
The Pennsylvania State University
201 Steidle Building
University Park, PA 16802
324. Donald R. Uhlmann
Professor, Ceramics and Polymers
Department of Materials Science
and Engineering
Massachusetts Institute of
Technology
Cambridge, MA 02139
325. Thomas Vasilos
Manager, Electro Chemical Facility
Avco Corporation
201 Towell Street
Wilmington, MA 01887
326. V. Venkateswaran
Standard Oil Engineered Materials
Company
PO Box 832
Niagara Falls, NY 14302
327. John B. Wachtman, Jr.
Director, Center for Ceramics
Research
Rutgers University
PO Box 909
Piscataway, NJ 08854
328. Richard B. Wallace
Manager, Government
Research and Development
Programs
General Motors Corporation
Detroit Diesel Allison
Division
36880 Ecorse Road
Romulus, MI 48174
329. Harlan L. Watson
Subcommittee on Energy
Research and Production
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Science and
Technology
Rayburn Building
Suite 2321
Washington, DC 20515
330. Steven G. Wax
Department of Defense
Advanced Research Projects
Agency
Materials Science Division
1400 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22209
331. Albert R. C. Westwood
Corporate Director, R&D
Martin Marietta Laboratories
1450 South Rolling Road
Baltimore, MD 21227

332. Thomas J. Whalen
Principal Research Scientist
Ford Motor Company
Scientific Lab, Room 2023
333. Sheldon M. Wiederhorn
U.S. Department of Commerce
National Bureau of Standards
Inorganic Materials Division
Mechanical Properties Group
Gaithersburg, MD 20899
334. Roger R. Wills
Manager, Advanced Ceramic
Components
TRW, Inc.
Automotive Worldwide Sector
Valve Division
Cleveland, OH 44110
335. J. M. Wimmer
Supervisor, Nonmetallic Materials
Group
Garrett Turbine Engine Company
111 S. 34th Street, PO Box 5217
Phoenix, AZ 85010
336. David Wirth
Vice President, Technical
Operations & Engineering
Coors Porcelain Company
17750 North 32 Street
Golden, CO 80401
337. Thomas J. Wissing
Manager, Government Contract
Administration
Eaton Corporation
Engineering & Research Center
26201 Northwestern Highway
PO Box 766
Southfield, MI 48037
338. George W. Wolter
Howmet Turbine Components
Corporation
Technical Center
699 Benston Road
Whitehall, MI 49461
339. James C. Wood
NASA Lewis Research Center
21000 Brookpark Road, MS 500-21
Cleveland, OH 44135
340. Hun C. Yeh
Ceramic Supervisor
AiResearch Casting Company
19800 Van Ness Avenue
Torrance, CA 90509
341. Thomas M. Yonushonis
Cummins Engine Company, Inc.
Box 3005, Mail Code 50183
Columbus, IN 47202-3005
342. Don Zabierek
Air Force Wright
Aeronautical Laboratory
AFWAL/POTC
Wright-Patterson AFB,
OH 45433
343. Charles Zeh
Department of Energy
Morgantown Energy
Technology Center
PO Box 880
Morgantown, WV 26505
344. Klaus M. Zwilsky
Executive Director
National Materials
Advisory Board
National Research Council
2101 Constitution Avenue
Washington, DC 20418
345. Department of Energy
Oak Ridge Operations Office
Assistant Manager for Energy
Research and Development
PO Box E
Oak Ridge, TN 37831
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