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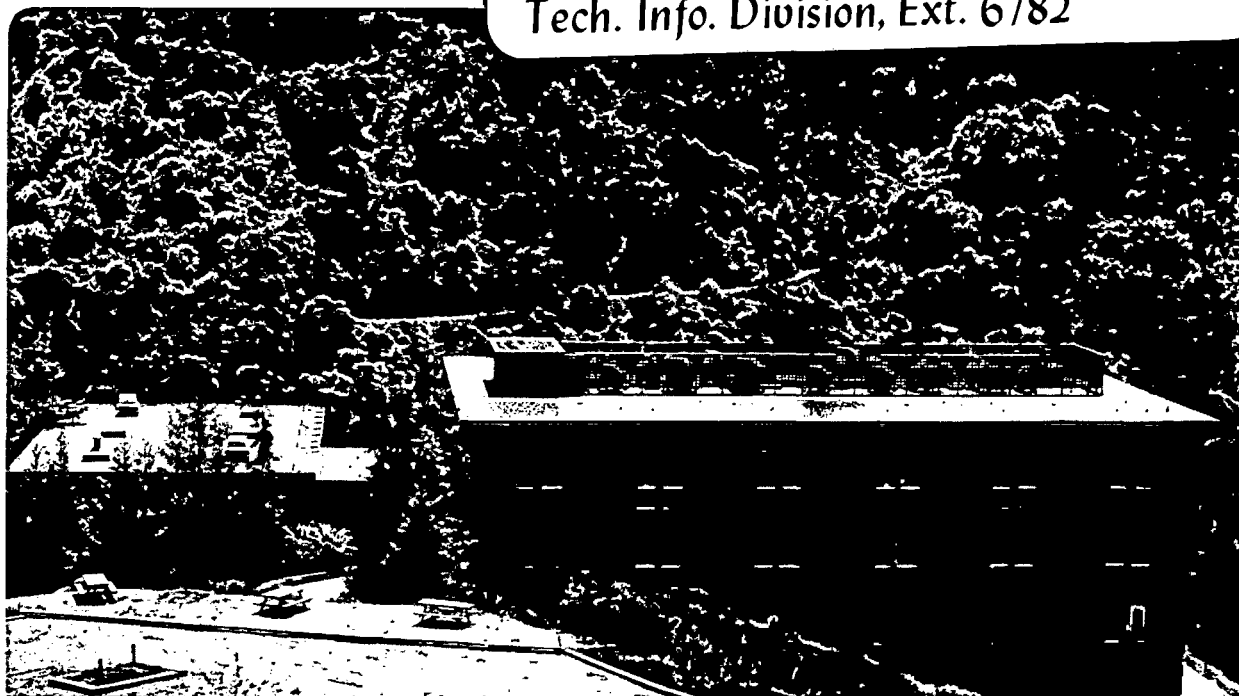
THE EFFECTS OF LONG-TERM EXPOSURE TO SIMULATED
FISSION PRODUCTS ON THE PROPERTIES OF ZIRCALOY-2

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August 1981

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THE EFFECTS OF LONG-TERM EXPOSURE TO SIMULATED
FISSION PRODUCTS ON THE PROPERTIES OF ZIRCALOY-2*

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THE EFFECTS OF LONG-TERM EXPOSURE TO SIMULATED
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Extended Abstract

Although considerable research has been carried out on the Pellet-Clad-Interaction (PCI) failure problem in LWR fuel rods, the nature of the chemical environment involved in such failures of the zircaloy cladding is still not definitely known. Further, the fuel rods are operated for long times during which they are constantly exposed to the fission product chemical environment. A comprehensive research program was, therefore, initiated to obtain useful information on the effect of prolonged exposure of Zircaloy-2 to fission product environments. Some results from the ongoing program have been reported previously [1,2]. This paper will present some further results which, we believe, are of major significance and have a direct bearing on the PCI failure of zircaloy-clad fuel rods.

First, a detailed thermochemical assessment was made of the chemical states and the transport properties of the fission products in LWR fuel rods. In addition, a series of compatibility tests with a variety of simulated fission elements and compounds was performed to characterize the reaction behavior of Zircaloy-2. Based on this information various simulated fission products were tested for activity in the embrittlement of Zircaloy-2. Room temperature tensile tests were carried out on flat specimens after exposure to high purity argon and to the individual products, I + Se, I + Te, Ag, Nb, Ru, Mo, W, BaO, SrO, Y₂O₃, CeO₂,

La_2O_3 , and Gd_2O_3 , from 50-8000 hours in the temperature range 350-700 °C. This choice of experimental conditions was dictated by a) the need to simulate normal fuel rod operating conditions (~ 350 °C, >8000 hours); and b) the need to consider conditions prevailing in "hot spot" regions (>500 °C, long times). In addition, we hoped that annealing at higher temperatures for short times might provide a limited basis for screening the more aggressive fission products for lower temperature annealing.

Annealing in the temperature range 350-500 °C resulted in a gradual but definite decrease in the room temperature ductility of the Zircaloy-2 specimens with annealing time (see Fig. 1). The specimens broke with high reduction in area and exhibited only ductile fracture morphology, except for specimens annealed in the rare earth and the alkaline earth oxides. These specimens were severely embrittled, although annealing times longer than 1500 hours were required for embrittlement (Fig. 1). By contrast, the specimens annealed in these oxides at 700 °C were completely embrittled after only 50 hours (see Fig. 2). This can be explained since the rate of diffusion of oxygen in the metal is much slower at 350 °C, whereas at 700 °C the rate is rapid enough to saturate the thin zircaloy specimens within 50 hours. The source of oxygen here is a nonstoichiometric double oxide layer that forms on the metal surface.

Besides the oxides, the other fission products tested also showed some remarkable effects on annealing the specimens at 700 °C (see Fig. 2). Mo and W are severely embrittling, as is Ru (a typical fracture surface is shown in Fig. 3). This is primarily due to the formation of ZrMo_2 , ZrW_2 , and ZrRu intermetallics along the grain boundaries, as indicated by x-ray diffraction, Auger electron spectroscopy, and electron microprobe

analysis. In the case of annealing in Ag and Nb, intermetallic compound formation causes a marked reduction in ductility of the specimens (see Fig. 2).

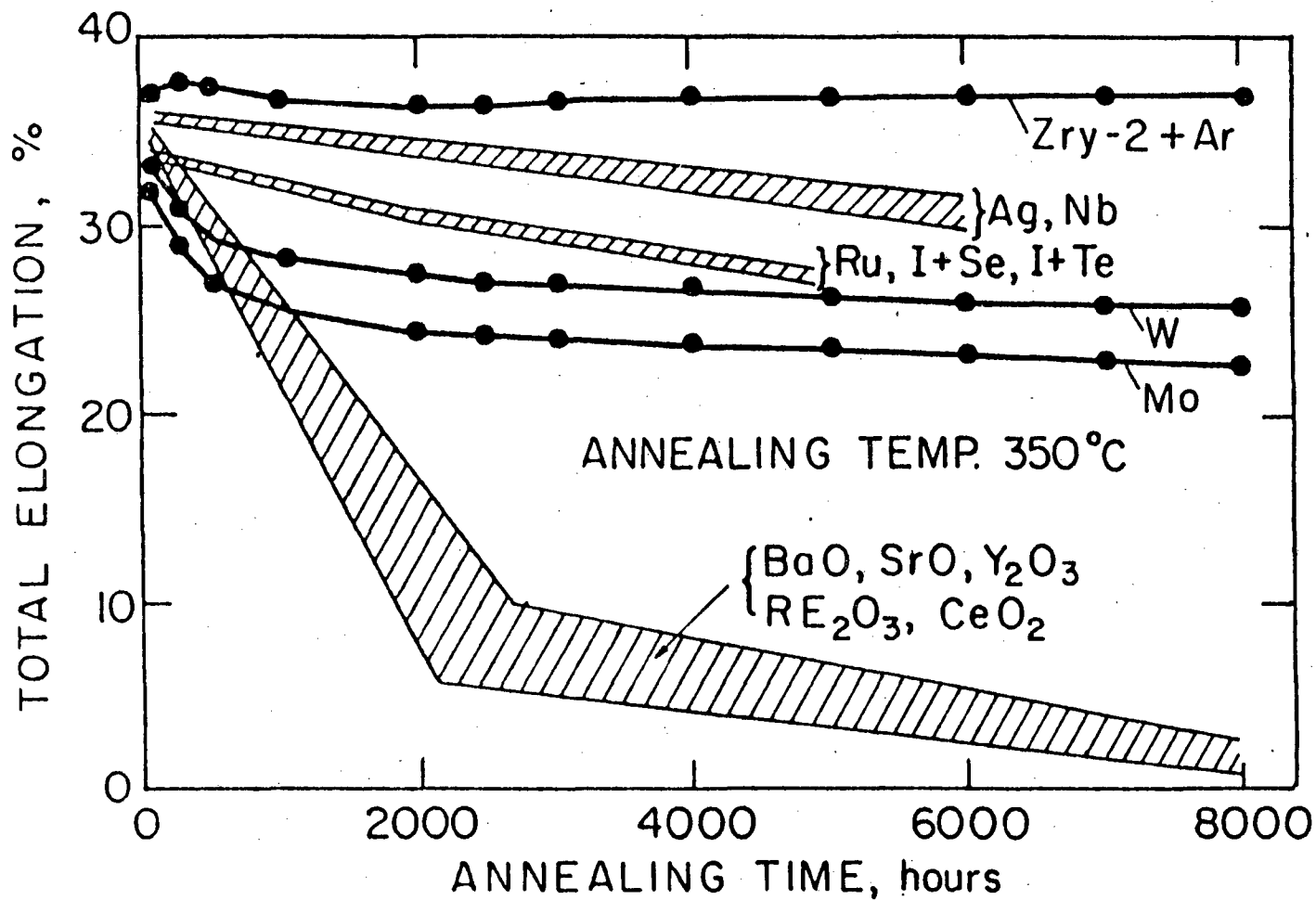
The implications of these results to the PCI failure problem in LWR fuel rods will be discussed in detail.

References

1. R. Kohli and F. Holub, Nucl. Technol., 48, 70 (1980).
2. R. Kohli and F. Holub, J. Nucl. Mater., 98, 116 (1981).

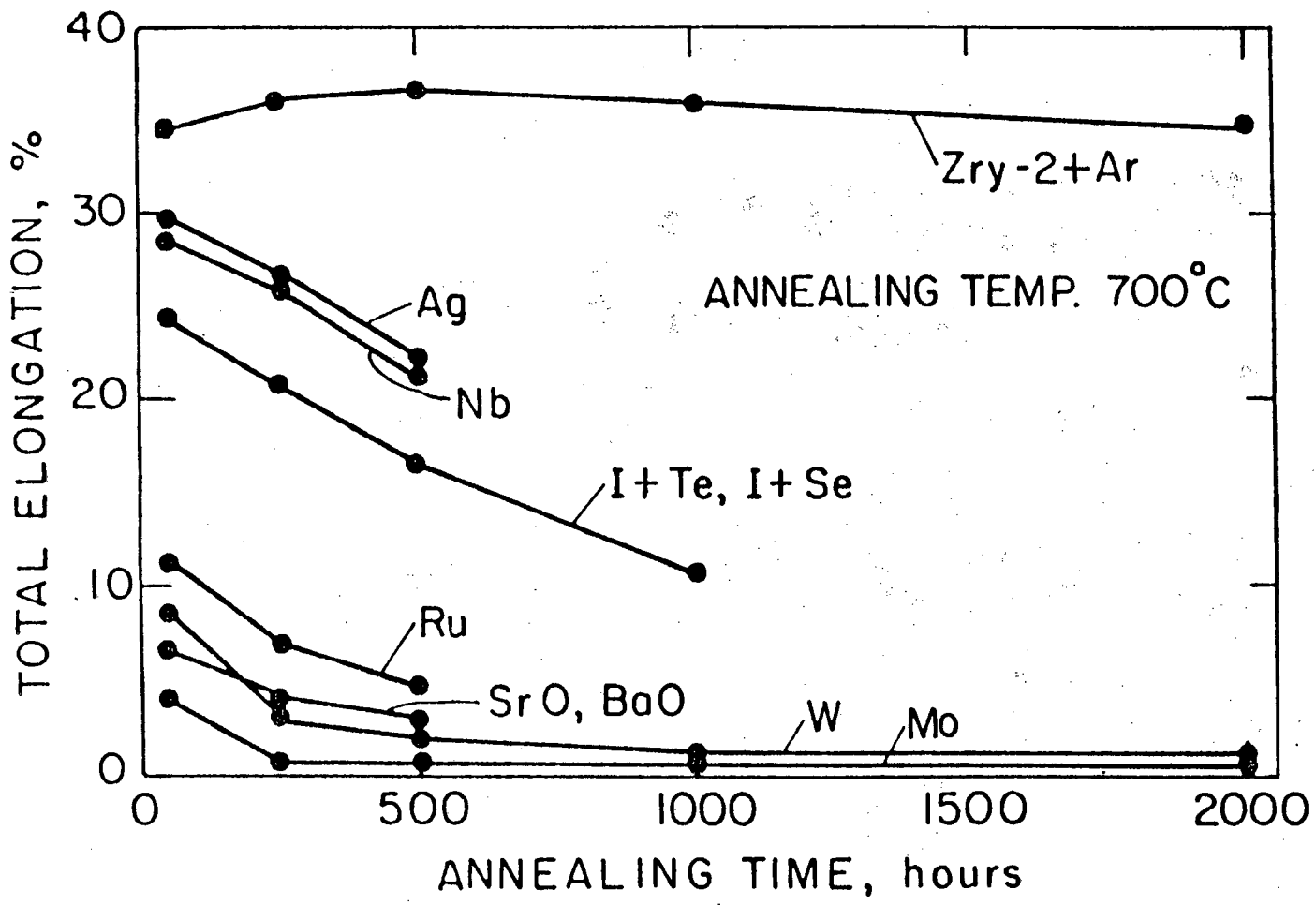
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Fig. 1. Variation of Total Elongation as a Function of Annealing Time for Zircaloy-2 Specimens Exposed to Argon and Fission Products at 350 °C.



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Fig. 2. Variation of Total Elongation as a Function of Annealing Time for Zircaloy-2 Specimens Exposed to Argon and Fission Products at 700 °C.

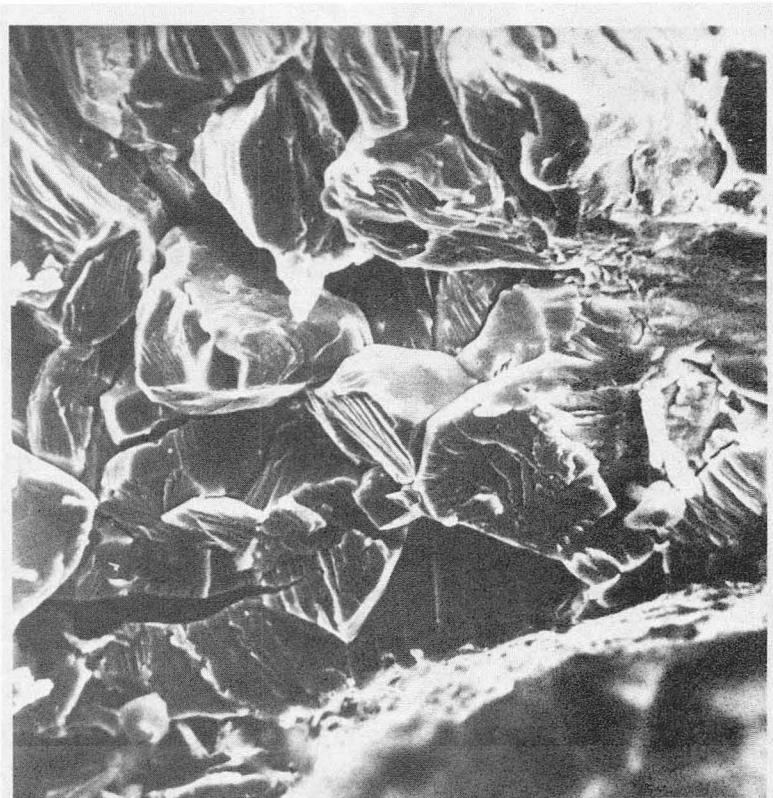


Fig. 3.

7 μm
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Scanning Electron Micrograph of the Fracture Surface of the Zircaloy-2 Specimen Annealed in Ruthenium at 700 °C for 250 Hours.

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