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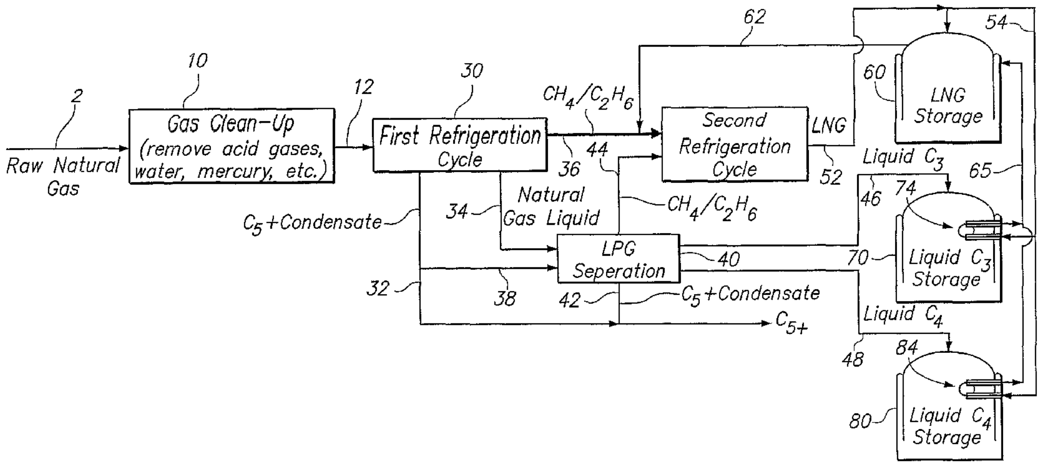
(54) Title: METHOD FOR RECOVERING LPG BOIL OFF GAS USING LNG AS A HEAT TRANSFER MEDIUM



(57) Abstract: A process for condensing a C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor which comprises contacting the C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor with a heat exchanger surface which is cooled by contact with LNG and recovering a liquefied C_3-C_4 product therefrom.

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METHOD FOR RECOVERING LPG BOIL OFF GAS USING LNG AS A HEAT TRANSFER MEDIUM

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims priority from U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/614,661 filed on September 29, 2004, the entire contents of which are incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention involves a method for recovering LPG boil off gas using LNG as a heat transfer medium.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Liquefied natural gas (LNG) is principally liquid methane, with smaller amounts of C_{2+} hydrocarbons also present. It is prepared by chilling a raw natural gas stream to a temperature and at a pressure to cause at least a portion of the methane in the raw gas to condense as a liquid. The natural gas stream used to prepare LNG may be recovered from any process which generates light hydrocarbon gases. Generally, the raw natural gas from which LNG is prepared is recovered from a crude oil or gas well.

Raw natural gas, in addition to the presence of methane, typically will also include varying amounts of C_2- hydrocarbons; C_3 hydrocarbons; and C_4 hydrocarbons. Natural gas which also comprises varying amounts of C_{5+} hydrocarbons is referred to as "wet natural gas" while "dry natural gas" comprises little or no C_{5+} hydrocarbons. As used herein, C_1 represents a hydrocarbonaceous compound having one carbon atom per molecule; C_2 has two carbon atoms per molecule, etc. C_3-C_4 represents a hydrocarbonaceous material, comprising predominately compounds having three carbon atoms per molecule and/or compounds having four carbon atoms per molecule. C_{5+} represents compounds having five or more carbon atoms per molecule. Methane is a representative example of a C_1 compound and is the principal constituent of raw natural gas. Ethane, ethylene, and mixtures thereof are representative examples of a C_2 compound. Propane, propene, butane, butenes and mixtures thereof are representative examples of a C_3-C_4 compound. Pentanes, isobutane, pentenes, hexanes, hexenes and comparable higher molecular weight species, and their mixtures, are representative of C_{5+} compounds.

The process of liquefying natural gas involves chilling the raw natural gas, either at atmospheric or super-atmospheric pressure, until the methane and ethane condense as liquids (LNG). On account of their higher molecular weights, any C_{3+} vapors contained in the raw natural gas will condense prior to the condensation of the C_1 and C_2 compounds, forming a liquid product termed "natural gas liquids". Each of the components which condense during the preparation of LNG has important commercial value. As already noted, C_1 and C_2 compounds are the major components of LNG. Any heavier materials which are present in the raw natural gas are carefully removed prior to condensing the LNG. Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), comprising C_3-C_4 hydrocarbons, is important as a refrigerant in the chilling process. LPG is also useful as a fuel in the LNG liquefaction process and has value as a transportation fuel. The C_{5+} condensate recovered from the raw natural gas is valuable as a blending component for fuels, particularly for transportation fuels. It is therefore important that the liquefied C_{5+} condensate and the C_3-C_4 LPG be prepared separately from the LNG. Where propane and/or butane are important products, they are stored in separate storage vessels as relatively pure hydrocarbons.

LPG (i.e., propane and butane) is typically stored in tanks at atmospheric or super-atmospheric pressure. The choice is primarily one of economics and compatibility with associated processes and equipment. LPG stored in tanks at atmospheric pressure is maintained at low temperatures (-40°F for the propane and 0°F for the butane) to maintain the material as a liquid. Heat absorbed into the tank from the surrounding ambient conditions cause both the propane and the butane to continuously boil off some amount of vapor, producing boil off gas (BOG). Typically, the propane and butane vapors are recovered by compressing the vapors with a screw or a reciprocating compressor from less than about 1 psig to about 200 psig and about 50 psig respectively, to reach the appropriate pressure-temperature equilibrium point (~100°F) to allow a cooling water exchanger or a fin fan to provide sufficient heat removal to condense the vapors. Since propane and butane each condense at a different temperature, each stream requires a separate compressor, knockout drum, condensing exchanger and cooling medium. Furthermore, the propane and butane streams cannot be combined into one recovery stream as the combined stream will contaminate the pure component tank. The recovery systems also require some back-up power generation system to drive the compressors in the event of a power failure, since pressure cannot be allowed to build in the tank or vapors to be vented to atmosphere.

LNG storage tanks have a boil off gas (BOG) recovery system including a blower and a recovery line from the storage tanks to either a flare or a location in the LNG process that can recover the low pressure LNG vapor stream (blowers are typically used when a fairly low increase in pressure is required). See for example, U.S. Patent No. 6,470,706.

The present invention is directed to an efficient process for preparing and storing separate LPG streams in the process of preparing LNG.

As used in this disclosure the word "comprises" or "comprising" is intended as an open-ended transition meaning the inclusion of the named elements, but not necessarily excluding other unnamed elements. The phrase "consists essentially of" or "consisting essentially of" is intended to mean the exclusion of other elements of any essential significance to the composition. The phrase "consisting of" or "consists of" is intended as a transition meaning the exclusion of all but the recited elements with the exception of only minor traces of impurities.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed to a process for condensing a C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor which comprises contacting the C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor with a heat exchanger surface which is cooled by contact with LNG and recovering a liquefied C_3-C_4 product therefrom. As used in this disclosure the phrase "C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor" refers to a hydrocarbon vapor consisting essentially of hydrocarbons containing between three and four carbon atoms. Thus the phrase may refer to a hydrocarbon vapor consisting essentially of propane or a hydrocarbon vapor consisting essentially of n-butane. The phrase C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor may also refer to a hydrocarbon vapor consisting essentially of a mixture containing one or more of propane, propene, n-butane, and butene.

In one embodiment of the process of the invention the heat exchange surface is contained in a bayonet exchanger. In an alternative embodiment the heat exchange surface is contained a condensing exchanger. Various other configurations of heat exchange devices are known to those skilled in the art and may be employed in carrying out the process of the invention.

Since liquefied propane is generally stored in vessels as relatively pure hydrocarbons, the present invention may also be described as a method of recovering C_3 boil off gas from a vessel containing liquefied C_3 which comprises contacting the C_3 boil off gas with a heat exchanger surface which is cooled by contact with LNG and recovering a liquefied C_3 product therefrom. The invention may also be described as a method of recovering C_4 boil off gas from a vessel containing liquefied C_4 which comprises contacting the C_4 boil off gas with a heat exchanger surface which is cooled by contact with LNG and recovering a liquefied C_4 product therefrom.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a schematic diagram of a LNG/LPG liquefaction facility in which bayonet heat exchangers are used to recover propane and butane boil off gas within their respective storage vessels.

Figure 2 is an alternative embodiment of a LNG/LPG liquefaction facility in which condensing exchangers located external to the propane and butane storage vessels are used to recover the boil off gases.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

In one embodiment of the present invention, the propane and butane are stored at atmospheric pressure. Preferably, within the LNG/LPG liquefaction facility, the LNG storage vessel and the LPG storage vessels are in close proximity to each other. In this configuration, the propane and butane boil off gases do not require compression to reach the appropriate pressure-temperature equilibrium point (-40°F and 0°F, respectively) when the LNG stream is used to condense the vapors. The use of LNG to condense the propane and butane eliminates the compressors and emergency back up systems typically present in conventional LPG liquefaction facilities.

LNG stored at atmospheric pressure is at a temperature (about -150°F or lower) which is lower than the condensation temperature of either C_4 or C_3. Thus, contacting C_3-C_4 vapors with LNG will cause at least a portion of the vapors to condense without the need for expensive compression. Further, condensing the C_3-C_4 vapors will result in some vaporization of the LNG. Therefore, a further aspect of the invention is the discovery that vaporizing LNG in order to condense C_3-C_4 vapors is preferred to condensing C_3-C_4 vapors using conventional methods. The LNG liquefaction system includes efficient methods for liquefying natural gas. Any C_1 or C_2 vapors generated during the liquefaction of C_3-C_4 is easily recondensed in the LNG process. In many situations, returning C_1 or C_2 vapors to the liquefaction process is more efficient than recondensing separate C_3-C_4 streams, as typically required in the conventional process.

Figure 1 represents a LNG/LPG liquefaction facility which employs the present invention to recover LPG boil off gas. In Figure 1, the raw natural gas stream (2) from which LNG is made is collected, either alone or in combination with heavier crude products, from a production well (not shown). The raw natural gas stream typically comprises methane, C_2-C_4 hydrocarbons, and generally lesser amounts of C_{5+} condensate. The stream may also contain contaminants such as water, carbon dioxide, hydrogen sulfide, nitrogen, dirt, iron sulfide, wax, crude oil, diamondoids, mercury and the like. These contaminants are undesirable in the liquefied products and are generally removed prior to the refrigeration steps as they tend to cause problems during processing. Acid contaminants which may lead to corrosion of the refrigeration materials are also preferably removed. The contaminants may be removed by conventional means which are well known to those skilled in the art.

After the natural gas stream is cleaned to remove contaminants (10), it is chilled in a first refrigeration zone (30). The first refrigeration zone (30) may comprise one or more refrigeration cycles. Example coolants include LNG, LPG or mixtures thereof. The chilling process produces natural gas liquid (34) and often a separate C_{5+} condensate stream (32). As shown in Figure 1, the C_{5+} condensate stream (32) removed from the first refrigeration zone may optionally be sent by line 38 to the LPG separation zone (40) for removing any C_4- components (i.e.,C_4 and lighter) which are contained in it.

Natural gas liquids (34) from the first refrigeration zone (30) are passed to the LPG separation zone (40) for isolation and recovery of separate liquid C_3 (46) and liquid C_4 (48) streams. These streams are stored in storage vessels 70 and 80, respectively. The LPG in stream 46 and in tank 70 comprises liquid C_3, usually referred to as simply propane. However, there also will generally be some varying amounts of both C_3H_8 (propane) and C_3H_6 (propene) hydrocarbons included in the liquid C_3, the ratio of the two species ranging from 100% C_3H_8 to 100% C_3H_6 by volume. Generally, C_3H_8 will be the predominant hydrocarbon. There may also be small amounts of contaminants in the liquid C_3 product, including some C_2- materials and some C_{4+} materials. The same is true for the LPG in stream (48) and in tank (80), which comprises liquid C_4. There will generally be amounts of both C_4H_{10} (butane) and C_4H_8 (butane) hydrocarbons in the liquid C_4, the ratio of the two species ranging from 100% C_4H_{10} to 100% C_4H_8 by volume. Generally, C_4H_{10} will be the predominant hydrocarbon. There may also be small amounts of contaminants in the liquid C_4 product, including some C_3- materials and some C_{5+} materials.

A natural gas stream (44) which is also produced in the LPG separation zone (40) is combined with natural gas stream (36) from the first refrigeration zone (30) for additional cooling in the second refrigeration zone (50). LNG is recovered as a liquid stream (52) from the second refrigeration zone for storage in LNG storage vessel 60. In one embodiment of the process, LNG stored in 60 and LGP stored in 70 and 80 are maintained at nominally atmospheric pressure, the actual pressure being slightly higher than ambient pressure to account for the vapors which are being generated by the evaporating liquids and which are being vented from the storage vessels. The two C_{5+} condensate streams (32) and (42), if present, may be combined or used separately in downstream processing, as fuel, as a petrochemical feedstock, and the like.

According to the present process, a slip stream from the LNG rundown product (52) is passed individually via line 54 to heat exchangers, called bayonet exchangers, shown as 74 and 84, respectively. The bayonet exchangers are suitably located within the storage vessels, such that the C_3 and C_4 vapors generated within the storage vessels pass over the bayonet exchangers in the vapor space of the storage vessel, thus eliminating all vapor lines external to the storage vessels. The chilled LNG which is used as the heat exchange medium within each exchanger is maintained at a temperature of around -160°F, such that the vapors generated within the storage vessels are condensed and returned to the liquid within the vessels. Use of these exchangers effectively reduces and controls the vaporization of C_3 and C_4 respectively entirely within their respective vessels and eliminates the need to pressurize the vapors in order to recondense them. Using LNG to condense the C_3 and C_4 boil off gases as illustrated in the drawing will cause some of the LNG to vaporize. The partially vaporized LNG product from the LPG chilling process is then returned via line 65 to the LNG storage vessel (60) where it is recycled for recovery with the LNG boil off gas by line 62 using conventional LNG BOG recovery.

Bayonet exchangers suitable for use with the invention are generally known in the art for heat exchange. See, for example, "Bayonet Exchangers", pages 738-745, of Process Heat Transfer by Ronald Q. Kern, May 1950, and in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,128,292; 3,887,003; 4,431,049; 4,479,535; and 3,861,461. In U.S. Patent No. 5,128,292 the bayonet exchanger is described generally as including a tube bundle wherein one end of the bundle is unattached, thereby minimizing problems due to the expansion and contraction of the heat exchanger components.

In a separate embodiment of the invention illustrated in Figure 2, each of the LPG storage vessels is equipped with a separate condensing exchanger. Except for the LPG vapor recovery equipment, the configuration of the LNG/LPG liquefaction is the same as illustrated in Figure 1, therefore, a detailed discussion of the similar portions of the diagram should not be necessary. A part of the LNG rundown product (52) is passed via line 54 to each condensing exchanger, shown as 72 for the C_3 storage vessel and 82 for the C_4 storage vessel, respectively, and the LPG liquids which are condensed pass via lines 75 and 85 with the help of pumps 73 and 83 back into the respective storage tanks (70 and 80) for the LPG. Vapor blowers servicing the C_3 and C_4 storage vessels shown as 71 and 81 may be needed to efficiently move the vapors through the exchangers. Condensing exchangers are known for use as heat exchangers, and their general use is taught in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,177,979; 4,745,768; 4,446,703 and in U.S. Application Publication No. 2004/0182752.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A process for condensing a C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor which comprises contacting the C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor with a heat exchanger surface which is cooled by contact with LNG and recovering a liquefied C_3-C_4 product therefrom.

2. The process of claim 1 wherein the liquefied C_3-C_4 product is liquefied C_3 material and the C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor comprises C_3 vapor.

3. The process of claim 1 wherein the liquefied C_3-C_4 product is liquefied C_4 material and the C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor comprises C_4 vapor.

4. The process of claim 1 wherein the C_3-C_4 hydrocarbon vapor comprises a mixture of C_3 and C_4 vapor.

5. The process of claim 1 wherein the LNG is maintained at atmospheric pressure or above.

6. The process of claim 1 wherein the LNG is maintained at a temperature of less than -150°F.

7. The process of claim 1 wherein the heat exchange surface is within a bayonet exchanger.

8. The process of claim 1 wherein the heat exchange surface is within a condensing exchanger.

9. A method of recovering C_3 boil off gas from a vessel containing liquefied C_3 which comprises contacting the C_3 boil off gas with a heat exchanger surface which is cooled by contact with LNG and recovering a liquefied C_3 product therefrom.

10. The method of claim 9 wherein the heat exchange surface is within a bayonet exchanger.

11. The method of claim 9 wherein the C_3 boil off gas is collected from the vessel and contacted with a heat exchange surface within a condensing exchanger.

12. The method of claim 9 wherein the liquefied C_3 is maintained at atmospheric pressure or above.

13. A method of recovering C_4 boil off gas from a vessel containing liquefied C_4 which comprises contacting the C_4 boil off gas with a heat exchanger surface which is cooled by contact with LNG and recovering a liquefied C_4 product therefrom.

14. The method of claim 13 wherein the heat exchange surface is within a bayonet exchanger.

15. The method of claim 13 wherein the C_4 boil off gas is collected from the vessel and contacted with a heat exchange surface within a condensing exchanger.

16. The method of claim 13 wherein the liquefied C_4 is maintained at atmospheric pressure or above.

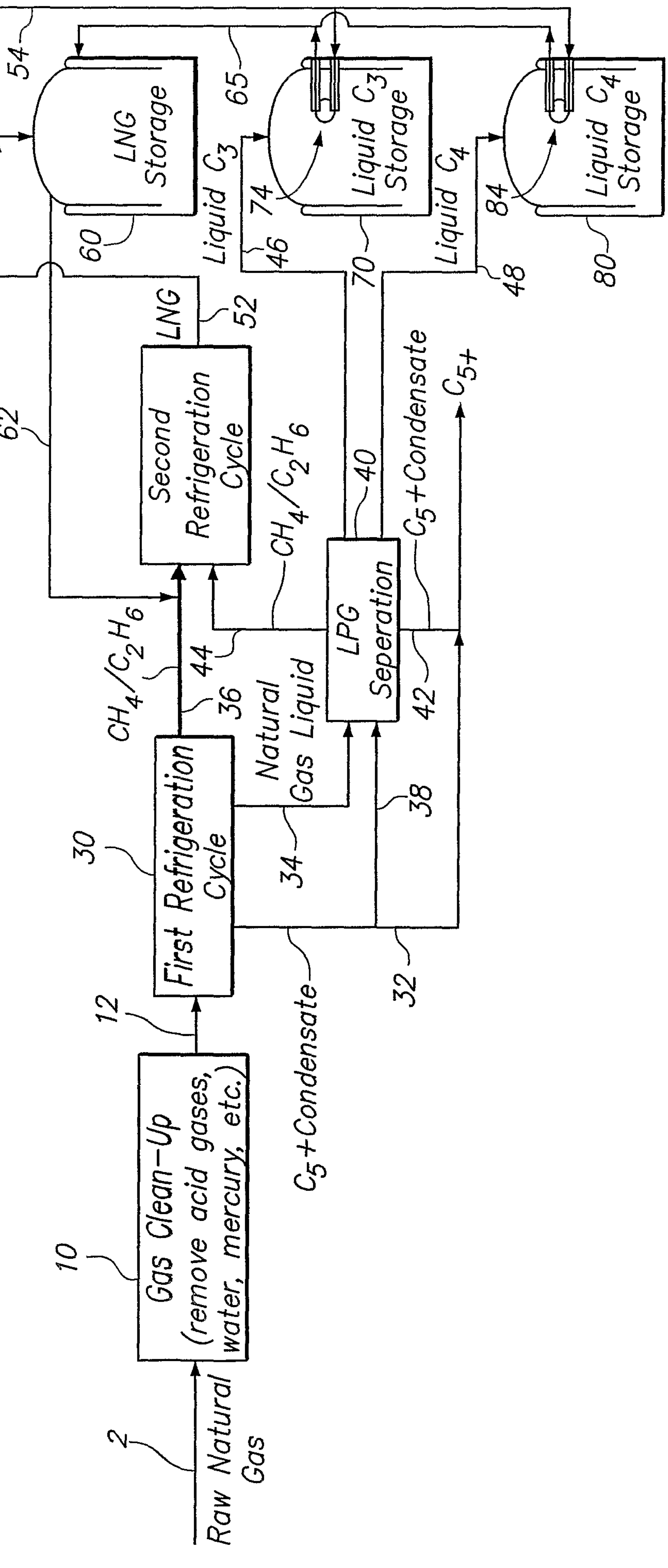
17. In a facility for liquefying LNG and propane which comprises an LNG liquefaction unit and a vessel for storing C_3, an improved method for recovering boil off C_3 gas from the vessel for storing C_3 which comprises contacting the C_3 boil off gas with a heat exchange surface cooled by LNG and recovering liquefied C_3 from the heat exchanger.

18. The facility of claim 17 wherein the LNG used to cool the heat exchange surface is at least partially vaporized and the vaporized LNG is sent to the LNG liquefaction unit and recovered as LNG.

19. In a facility for liquefying LNG and C_4 which comprises an LNG liquefaction unit and a vessel for storing C_4, an improved method for recovering boil off C_4 gas from the vessel for storing C_4 which comprises contacting the C_4 boil off gas with a heat exchange surface cooled by LNG and recovering liquefied C_4 from the heat exchanger.

20. The facility of claim 19 wherein the LNG used to cool the heat exchange surface is at least partially vaporized and the vaporized LNG is sent to the LNG liquefaction unit and recovered a LNG.

FIG. 1


Raw Natural Gas
2
Gas Clean-Up (remove acid gases, water, mercury, etc.)
10
12
First Refrigeration Cycle
30
C_5+Condensate
32
Natural Gas Liquid
34
38
CH_4/C_2H_6
36
44
LPG Seperation
42
C_5+Condensate
C_{5+}
40
CH_4/C_2H_6
Second Refrigeration Cycle
62
LNG
52
60
LNG Storage
54
65
Liquid C_3
46
74
70
Liquid C_3 Storage
Liquid C_4
48
84
80
Liquid C_4 Storage

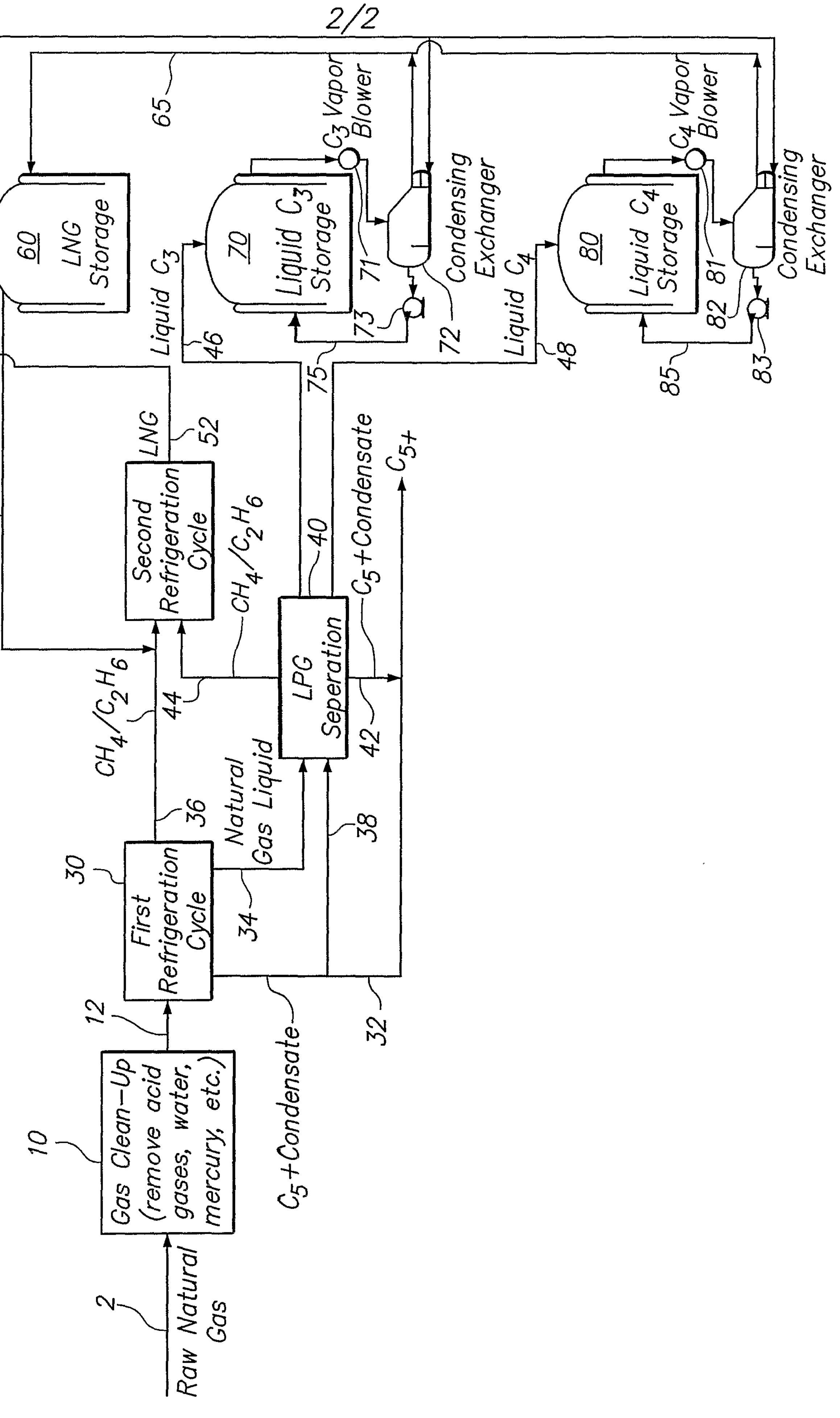

Raw Natural Gas
2
10
Gas Clean-Up (remove acid gases, water, mercury, etc.)
12
30
First Refrigeration Cycle
C_5+Condensate
32
34
Natural Gas Liquid
36
CH_4/C_2H_6
38
44
LPG Seperation
42
C_5+Condensate
C_{5+}
40
CH_4/C_2H_6
Second Refrigeration Cycle
LNG
52
62
52
60
LNG Storage
54
65
Liquid C_3
46
70
Liquid C_3 Storage
C_3 Vapor Blower
71
Condensing Exchanger
72
73
75
Liquid C_4
48
80
Liquid C_4 Storage
C_4 Vapor Blower
81
Condensing Exchanger
82
83
85

FIG. 2