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- (71) Applicant(s)  
**AK Steel Properties, Inc.**
- (72) Inventor(s)  
**Mutschler, Ralph;Thomas, Grant Aaron;Janavicius, Paul Valdas;Garza-Martinez, Luis G.**
- (74) Agent / Attorney  
**FPA Patent Attorneys Pty Ltd, Level 43 101 Collins Street, Melbourne, VIC, 3000**
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(71) Applicant: AK STEEL PROPERTIES, INC.; 9227 Centre Point, West Chester, OH 45069 (US).

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(72) Inventors: MUTSCHLER, Ralph; 7782 Lakota Hills Drive, West Chester, OH 45069 (US). THOMAS, Grant, Aaron; 5708 Rachel's View, Liberty Township, OH 45011 (US). JANAVICIUS, Paul, Valdas; 540 Cody Pass, Wyoming, OH 45215 (US). GARZA-MARTINEZ, Luis, G.; 46 Fleming Road, Wyoming, OH 45215 (US).

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(74) Agents: SCHOEN, Ann G. et al.; Frost Brown Todd LLC, 301 East Fourth Street, 3300 Great American Tower, Cincinnati, OH 45202 (US).

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(54) Title: ZINC-COATED STEEL FOR PRESS HARDENING APPLICATION AND METHOD OF PRODUCTION

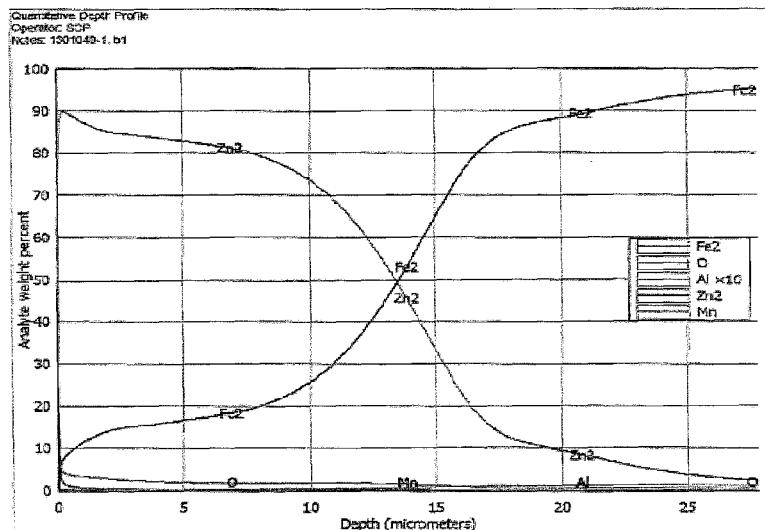


Figure 3

(57) Abstract: A zinc-coated steel may be produced by performing a pre-alloying heat treatment after galvannealing the steel and prior to the hot stamping the steel. The pre-alloying heat treatment is conducted at a temperature between about 850°F and about 950°F in an open coil annealing process. The pre-alloying heat treatment allows for shorter time at the austenitization temperature to form a desired a-Fe phase in the coating by increasing the concentration of iron. This also decreases the loss of zinc, and a more adherent oxide exists after hot stamping.

**ZINC-COATED STEEL FOR PRESS HARDENING**  
**APPLICATIONS AND METHOD OF PRODUCTION**

**CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

[0001] The present application hereby claims the benefit of the provisional patent application of the same title, Serial No. 61/824,791, filed on May 17, 2013, the disclosure of which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

**BACKGROUND**

[0002] Press hardened steels are typically high strength and have been used in automotive applications for reducing weight while improving safety performance. Hot stamped parts have mainly been made from either bare steel, which must have the oxide removed after stamping, or from steel with an aluminized coating. The aluminized coating provides a barrier form of corrosion protection. A zinc-based coating further provides hot stamped parts with active, or cathodic corrosion protection. For instance, hot dip galvanized steel typically includes a Zn-Al coating and hot dip galvannealed steel typically includes a Zn-Fe-Al coating. Due to the melting temperature of zinc, liquid zinc can be present during the hot stamping process and lead to cracking due to liquid metal embrittlement (LME). Time at the high temperature required for austenitization of the steel substrate prior to hot stamping allows for diffusion of iron into the galvannealed coating to avoid LME. However, during the time required to allow for sufficient iron diffusion, zinc in the coating can be lost due to vaporization and oxidation. This oxide may also exhibit poor adhesion and tend to flake off during stamping.

[0003] Disclosed herein is a pre-alloying heat treatment performed after galvannealing and prior to the hot stamping austenitization step. The pre-alloying allows for shorter time at the austenitization temperature to form a desired  $\alpha$ -Fe phase in the coating by increasing the concentration of iron. This also decreases the loss of zinc, and a more adherent oxide exists after hot stamping.

2014265241 13 Dec 2016

## SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

**[0003A]** In one aspect of the invention there is provided a method of producing steel, the method comprising the steps of: galvannealing the steel to form a coating on the steel; determining a treatment time for a pre-alloying heat treatment such that the Fe content in the coating is between 15 wt% and 25 wt% after the pre-alloying heat treatment; and subjecting the galvannealed steel to the pre-alloying heat treatment conducted at a temperature between about 850°F and about 950°F prior to hot stamping, wherein the steel is subjected to the pre-alloying heat treatment for the treatment time.

**[0003B]** In another aspect of the invention there is provided a steel having a galvannealed coating, wherein the galvannealed coating comprises an Fe level between about 15 wt% and about 25 wt% in response to a pre-alloying heat treatment conducted after galvannealing, but before austenization of the steel at a temperature between about 850°F and about 950°F in an open coil annealing process.

**[0003C]** Reference to any prior art in the specification is not an acknowledgment or suggestion that this prior art forms part of the common general knowledge in any jurisdiction or that this prior art could reasonably be expected to be understood, regarded as relevant, and/or combined with other pieces of prior art by a skilled person in the art.

**[0003D]** As used herein, except where the context requires otherwise, the term "comprise" and variations of the term, such as "comprising", "comprises" and "comprised", are not intended to exclude other additives, components, integers or steps.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

[0004] The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate embodiments, and together with the general description given above, and the detailed description of the embodiments given below, serve to explain the principles of the present disclosure.

[0005] FIG. 1 depicts a graph of a glow discharge spectroscopy scan of a galvannealed steel sheet after a pre-alloying treatment of 0 hours, or “as-coated.”

[0006] FIG. 2 depicts a graph of a glow discharge spectroscopy scan of a galvannealed steel sheet after a pre-alloying treatment of 1 hour.

[0007] FIG. 3 depicts a graph of a glow discharge spectroscopy scan of a galvannealed steel sheet after a pre-alloying treatment of 4 hours.

[0008] FIG. 4A depicts a graph of a glow discharge spectroscopy scan of the galvannealed steel sheet of FIG. 1 after hot stamping.

[0009] FIG. 4B depicts an optical micrograph of a cross-section of the galvannealed steel sheet of FIG. 4A.

[0010] FIG. 5A depicts a graph of a glow discharge spectroscopy scan of the galvannealed steel sheet of FIG. 2 after hot stamping.

[0011] FIG. 5B depicts an optical micrograph of a cross-section of the galvannealed steel sheet of FIG. 5A.

[0012] FIG. 6A depicts a graph of a glow discharge spectroscopy scan of the galvannealed steel sheet of FIG. 3 after hot stamping.

[0013] FIG. 6B depicts an optical micrograph of a cross-section of the galvannealed steel sheet of FIG. 6A.

[0014] FIG. 7 depicts an optical micrograph of a galvannealed steel sheet processed according to the conditions of FIG. 4A, showing a cross-hatched area.

[0015] FIG. 8 depicts an optical micrograph of a galvannealed steel sheet processed according to the conditions of FIG. 5A, showing a cross-hatched area.

[0016] FIG. 9 depicts an optical micrograph of a galvannealed steel sheet processed according to the conditions of FIG. 6A, showing a cross-hatched area.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0017] Press hardened steel can be formed from boron-containing steel, such as the 22MnB5 alloy. Such a 22MnB5 alloy typically comprises between about 0.20 and about 0.25 C, between about 1.0 and about 1.5 Mn, between about 0.1 and about 0.3 Si, between about 0.1 and about 0.2 Cr, and between about 0.0005 and about 0.005 B. As apparent to one with ordinary skill in the art in view of the teachings herein, other suitable alloys can be used. Other suitable alloys can include any suitable press hardenable alloys that include a sufficient hardenability to produce a desired combination of strength and ductility for hot stamping. For example, similar alloys typically used in automotive hot stamping applications can be used. The alloy is processed into a cold rolled steel strip by typical casting, hot rolling, pickling, and cold rolling processes.

[0018] The cold rolled steel strip is then hot dip galvannealed to produce a Zn-Fe-Al coating on the steel strip. The coating weight is typically in the range of about 40 to about 90 g/m<sup>2</sup> per side. Temperatures of the galvannealing furnace range from about 900 to about 1200°F (about 482 to about 649°C) and result in Fe levels in the coating of about 5 to about 15 wt%. Aluminum levels in the zinc pot range from about 0.10 to about 0.20 wt%, with the analyzed Al level in the coating at typically double the amount in the pot. Other suitable methods for galvannealing the steel strip will be apparent to one with ordinary skill in the art in view of the teachings herein.

[0019] The steel strip possessing the galvannealed coating is then given a pre-alloying heat treatment designed to increase the Fe level in the coating to between about 15 and about 25 wt%. This heat treatment has a peak temperature of about 850 to about 950°F

(about 454 to about 510°C) with a dwell time of about 1 to about 10 hours, such as about 2 to about 6 hours. The pre-alloying heat treatment can be conducted through an open coil annealing practice. The pre-alloying heat treatment can be further conducted in a protective atmosphere. Such a protective atmosphere can include a nitrogen atmosphere. In some versions, the nitrogen atmosphere includes about 100% N<sub>2</sub>. In other versions, the nitrogen atmosphere includes about 95% N<sub>2</sub> and about 5% H<sub>2</sub>. Other suitable methods for providing a pre-alloying heat treatment will be apparent to one with ordinary skill in the art in view of the teachings herein.

[0020] Once the galvannealed steel strip has been given the pre-alloying heat treatment, the steel strip is subjected to a hot stamping austenitization step. Hot stamping is well known in the art. Temperatures are typically in the range of about 1616 to about 1742°F (about 880 to about 950°C). Because of the pre-alloying heat treatment, time required at this austenitization temperature may be decreased. For instance, the time at the austenitization temperature can be between about 2 and about 10 minutes, or between about 4 and about 6 minutes. This forms a single phase  $\alpha$ -Fe in the coating with approximately 30% Zn. Other suitable hot stamping methods will be apparent to one with ordinary skill in the art in view of the teachings herein.

[0021] Examples

[0022] A galvannealed steel coil was produced using the processes described above. A 22MnB5 steel coil was used having a thickness of about 1.5 mm. The galvannealed coating weight was about 55 g/m<sup>2</sup>. In this example, small panels of the galvannealed steel were given pre-alloy heat treatments in a nitrogen atmosphere at about 900°F. A first panel was not given the pre-alloy heat treatment, i.e., the pre-alloy treatment was for 0 hours, or “as-coated.” A second panel was given the pre-alloy heat treatment for about 1 hour. A third panel was given the pre-alloy heat treatment for about 4 hours. The pre-alloyed panels were then austenitized at about 1650°F for about 4 minutes and quenched between water cooled flat dies to simulate the hot stamping process.

[0023] The effect of the pre-alloying treatment was shown in glow discharge spectroscopy (GDS) scans, which show chemical composition through the thickness of

the coating. The GDS scans after pre-alloying treatments for 0, 1, and 4 hours are shown in FIGS. 1-3 respectively. As shown, the Fe content in the coating increases with longer time at about 900°F.

[0024] FIGS. 4A, 5A, and 6A show GDS scans of the three panels, respectively, after hot stamping simulations. FIGS. 4B, 5B, and 6B show micrographs of the microstructures of the three panels, respectively, after hot stamping simulations. As length of the pre-alloy treatment time increases from 0 to 1 to 4 hours, the content of Fe in the coating increases. The micrographs indicate that as the %Fe increases, gaps between grains in the coating decrease. The gaps between coating grains are indicative of liquid on the grain boundaries at high temperature, thereby showing that the pre-alloy heat treatment reduces the amount of liquid Zn present at the time of hot stamping. With the amount of liquid reduced, the potential for LME cracking is in turn reduced.

[0025] Zinc oxide formed during the austenitization treatment can be prone to flaking during hot stamping due to poor adhesion to the coating. Performing the pre-alloying heat treatment prior to austenitization and hot stamping can result in a more adherent oxide resistant to flaking. To measure this effect, panels processed according to the conditions described above, with pre-alloying times of about 0, 1, and 4 hours, were phosphated and e-coated in a laboratory system. The coated panels were given a cross-hatch and tape-pull test to test adherence. FIGS. 7-9 show micrographs of the cross-hatched areas of the three panels, respectively. As shown in FIGS. 7 and 8, panels with about 0 and 1 hour pre-alloying heat treatments show lower adhesion with loss of coating from squares within the cross-hatches. FIG. 9 shows that the panel with about 4 hours of the pre-alloying treatment shows increased adhesion with little to no loss of coating from squares within the cross-hatches.

[0026] While the present disclosure has illustrated by description several embodiments and while the illustrative embodiments have been described in considerable detail, it is not the intention of the applicant to restrict or in any way limit the scope of the appended claims to such detail. Additional advantages and modifications may readily appear to those skilled in the art.

2014265241 13 Dec 2016

## CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method of producing steel, the method comprising the steps of:
  - galvannealing the steel to form a coating on the steel;
  - 5 determining a treatment time for a pre-alloying heat treatment such that the Fe content in the coating is between 15 wt% and 25 wt% after the pre-alloying heat treatment; and
  - subjecting the galvannealed steel to the pre-alloying heat treatment conducted at a temperature between about 850°F and about 950°F prior to hot stamping, wherein the steel is subjected to the pre-alloying heat treatment for the treatment time.
- 0 2. The method of claim 1, wherein the coating comprises zinc, iron, and aluminum.
3. The method of claim 1, wherein the coating weight is in the range of about 40 to about 90 g/m<sup>2</sup>.
4. The method of claim 1, wherein the galvannealing step is performed at a temperature between about 900°F and about 1200°F.
- 5 5. The method of claim 1, wherein the pre-alloying heat treatment step is conducted in an open coil annealing process.
6. The method of claim 1, wherein the treatment time of the pre-alloying heat treatment is between 1 hour and 10 hours.
7. The method of claim 6, wherein the treatment time of the pre-alloying heat treatment is 20 between about 2 hours and about 6 hours.
8. The method of claim 1, wherein the pre-alloying heat treatment is conducted in a protective atmosphere.
9. The method of claim 8, wherein the protective atmosphere comprises nitrogen.
10. The method of claim 9, wherein the protective atmosphere comprises about 100% N<sub>2</sub>.
- 25 11. The method of claim 9, wherein the protective atmosphere further comprises hydrogen.

2014265241  
13 Dec 2016

12. The method of claim 11, wherein the protective atmosphere comprises about 95% N<sub>2</sub> and about 5% H<sub>2</sub>.
13. The method of claim 1 further comprises hot stamping the steel after the pre-alloying heat treatment.
- 5 14. The method of claim 13, wherein the hot stamping step comprises an austenitizing step, wherein the austenitizing step comprises heating the steel to a temperature between about 1616°F and about 1742°F.
15. The method of claim 14, wherein the austenitizing step proceeds for a predetermined duration, wherein the duration comprises a time between 2 minutes and 10 minutes.
- 0 16. The method of claim 13, further determining the treatment time of the pre-alloying heat treatment such that the coating comprises a single phase  $\alpha$ -Fe with approximately 30% Zn after hot stamping.
17. A steel having a galvannealed coating, wherein the galvannealed coating comprises an Fe level between about 15 wt% and about 25 wt% in response to a pre-alloying heat treatment conducted after galvannealing, but before austenization of the steel at a temperature between about 850°F and about 950°F in an open coil annealing process.
18. The steel of claim 17, wherein the pre-alloying heat treatment comprises a dwell time between about 1 hour and about 10 hours.
- 5 19. The steel of claim 17, wherein the pre-alloying heat treatment is conducted in a protective atmosphere.
- 20

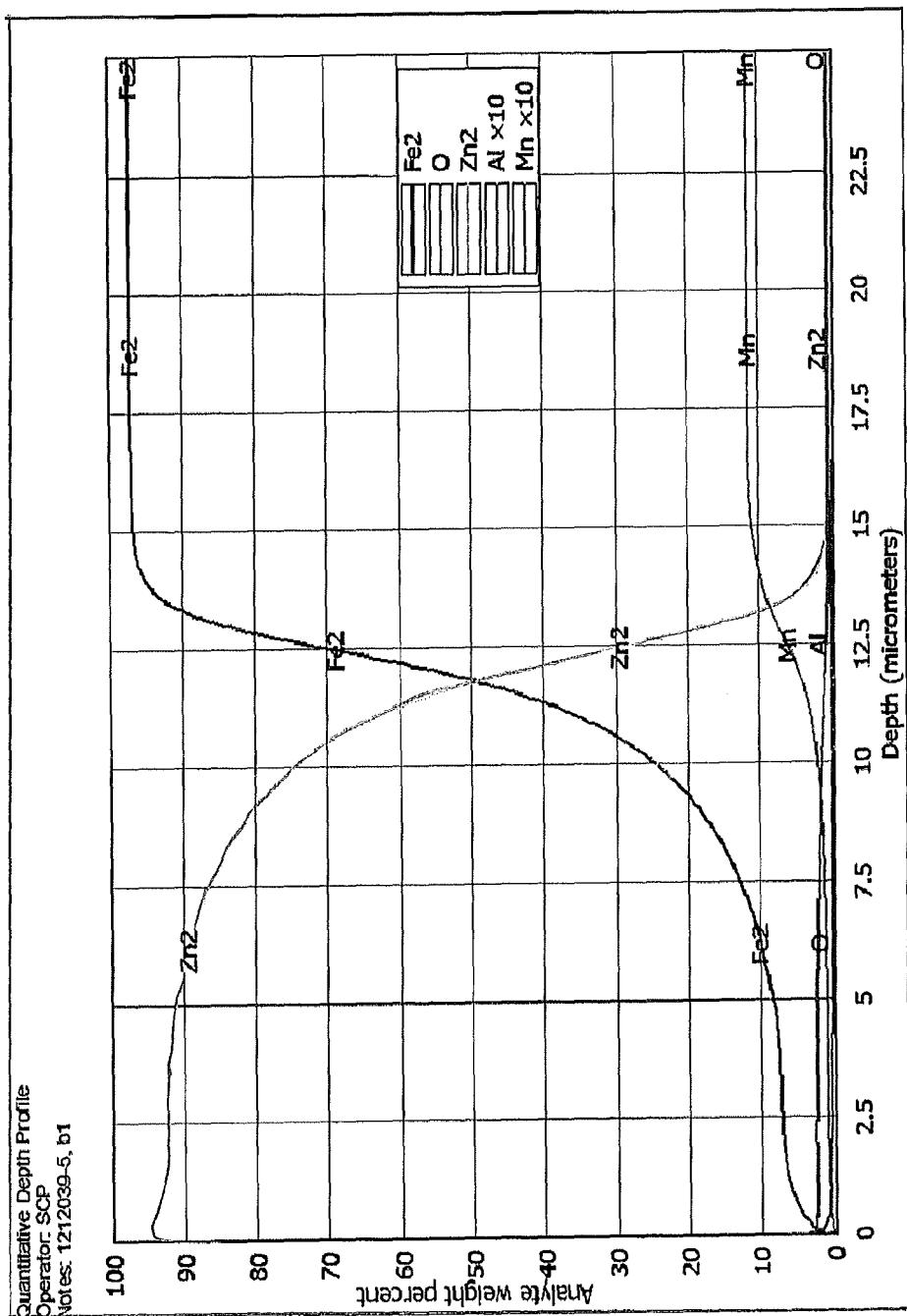


Figure 1

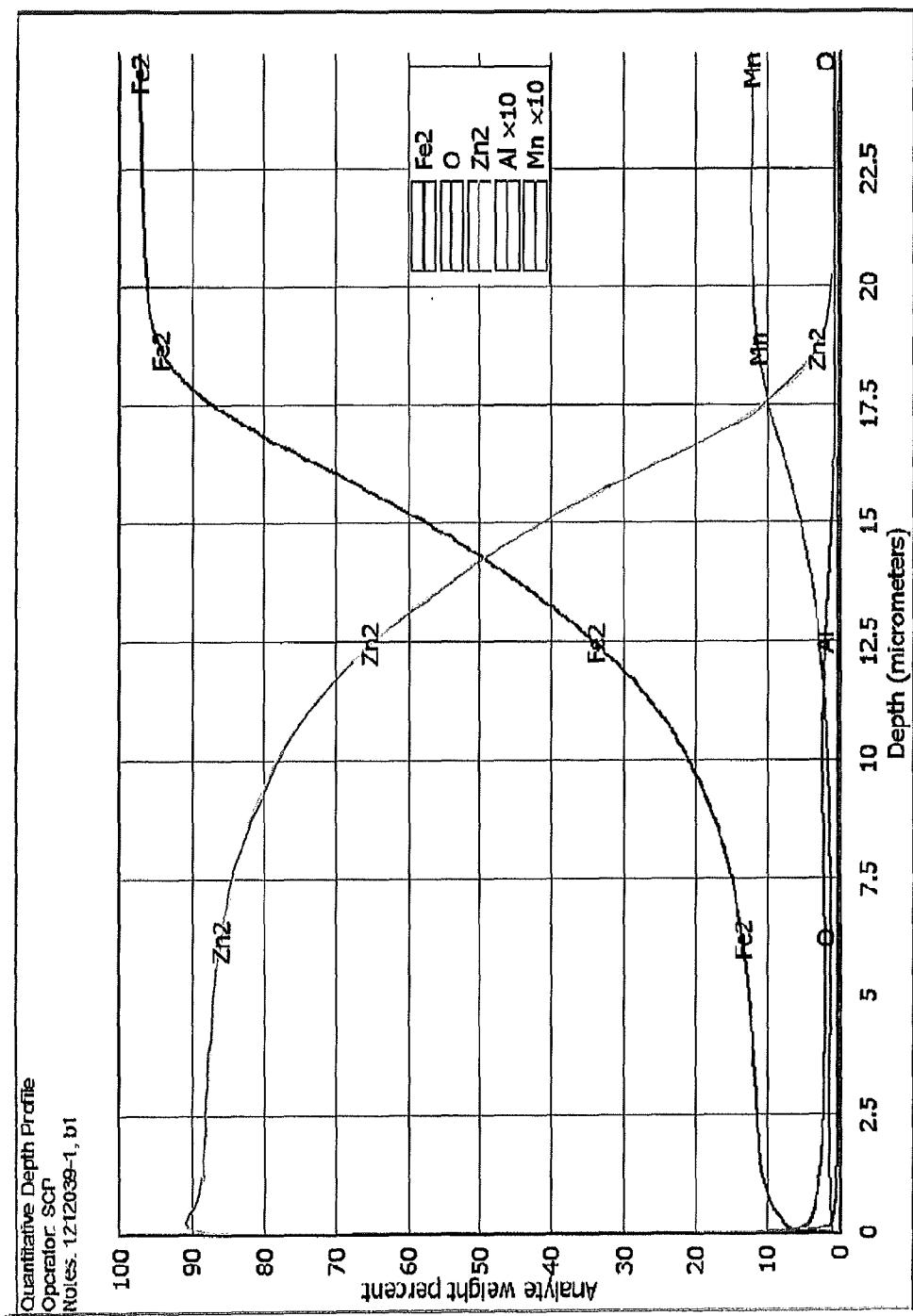


Figure 2

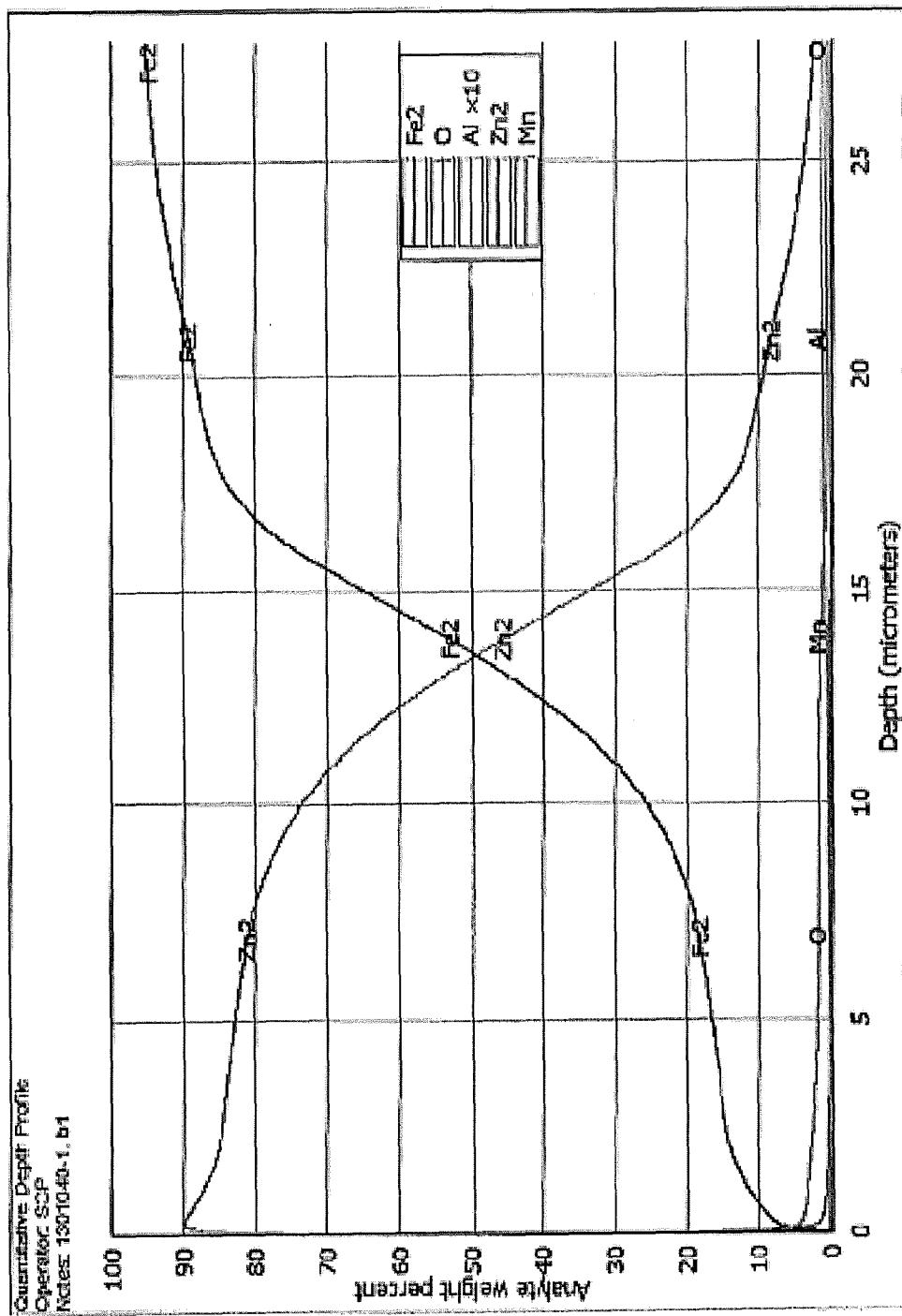


Figure 3

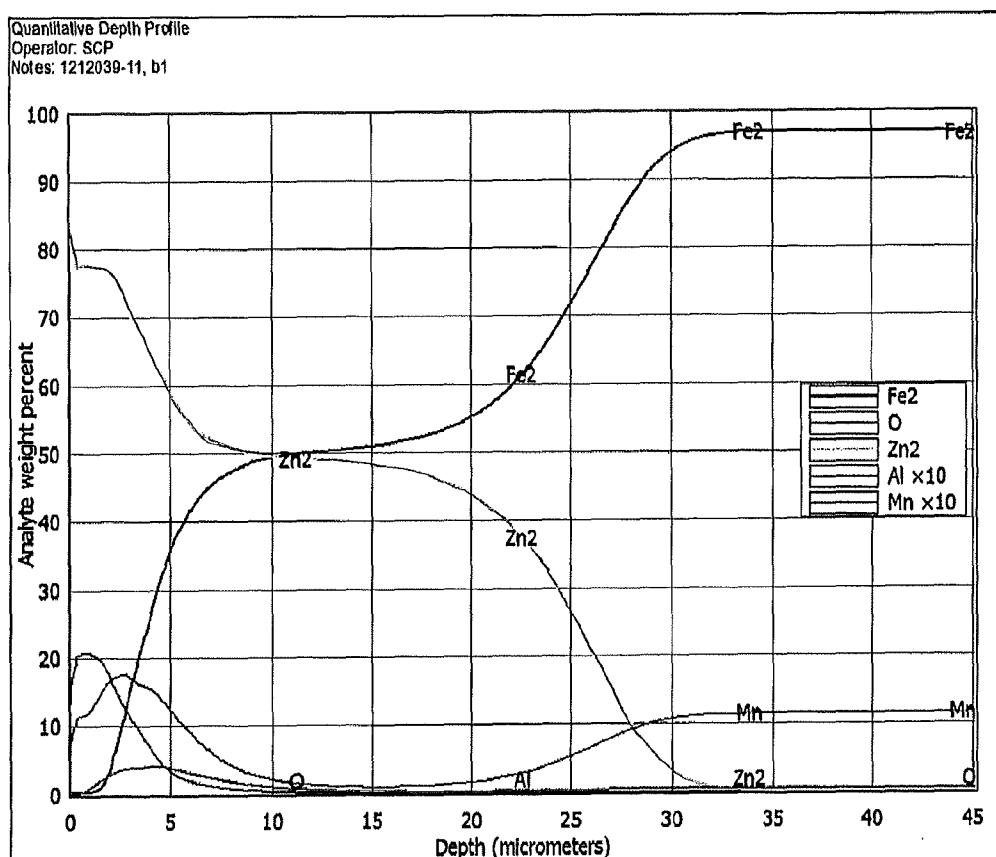


Figure 4A

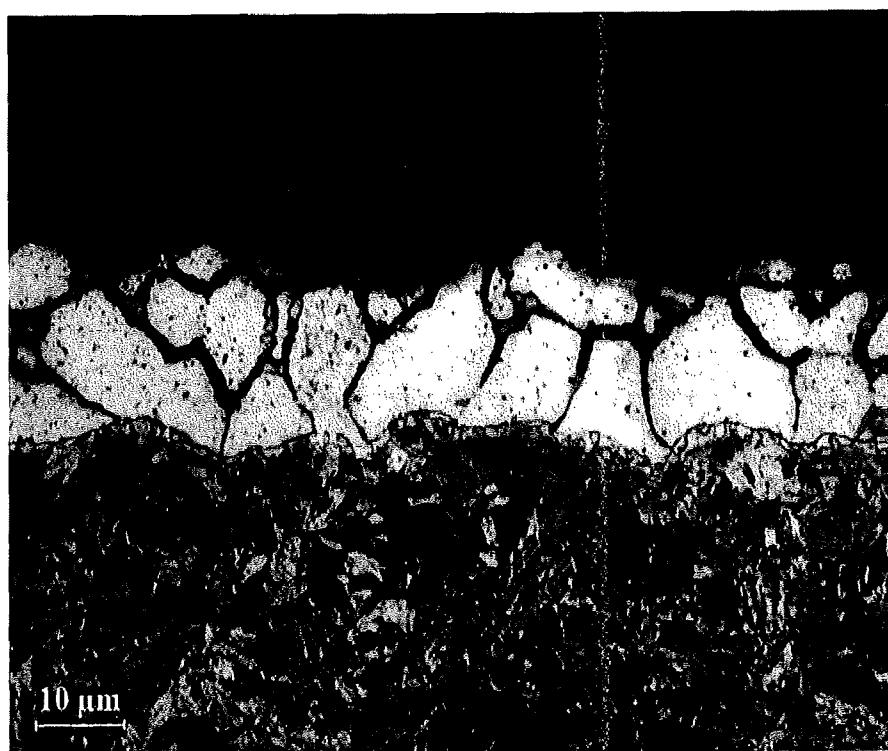


Figure 4B

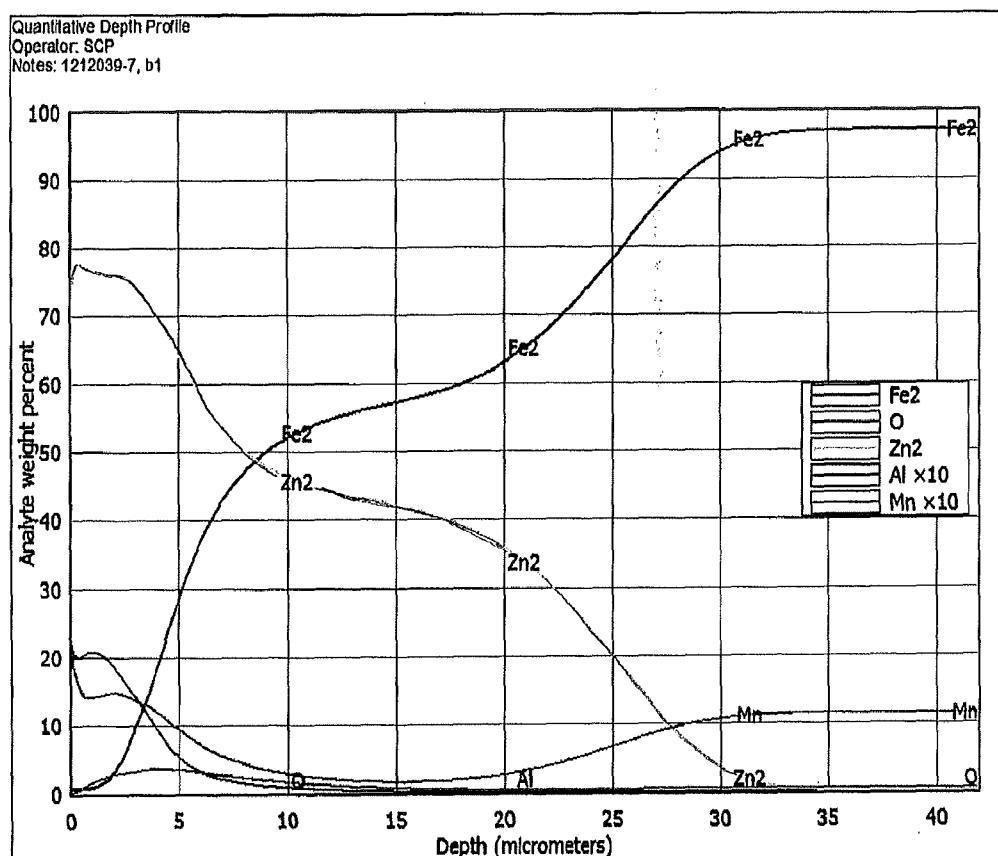


Figure 5A

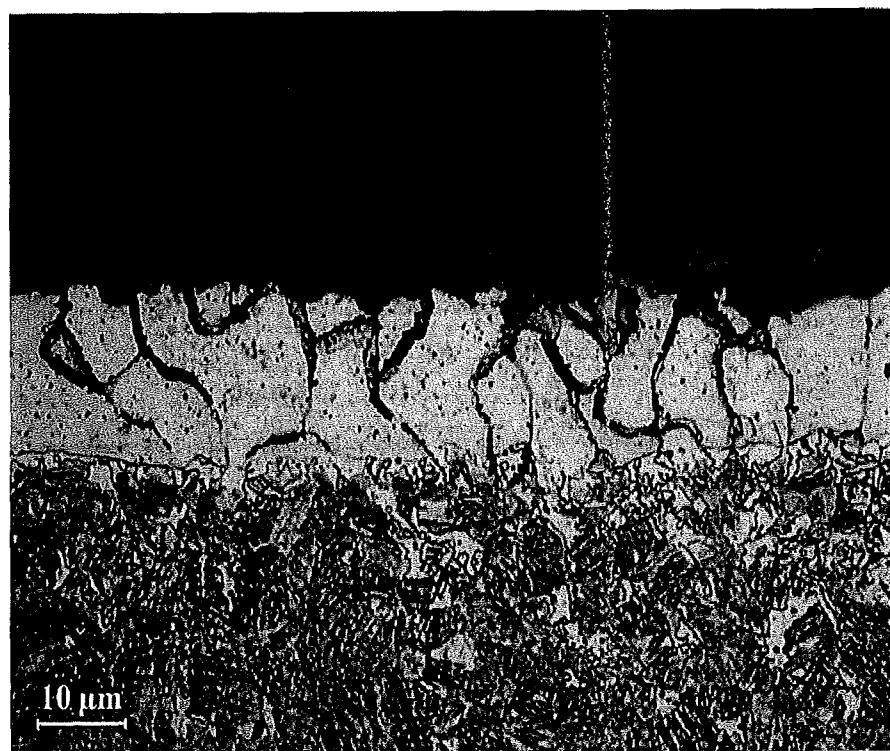


Figure 5B

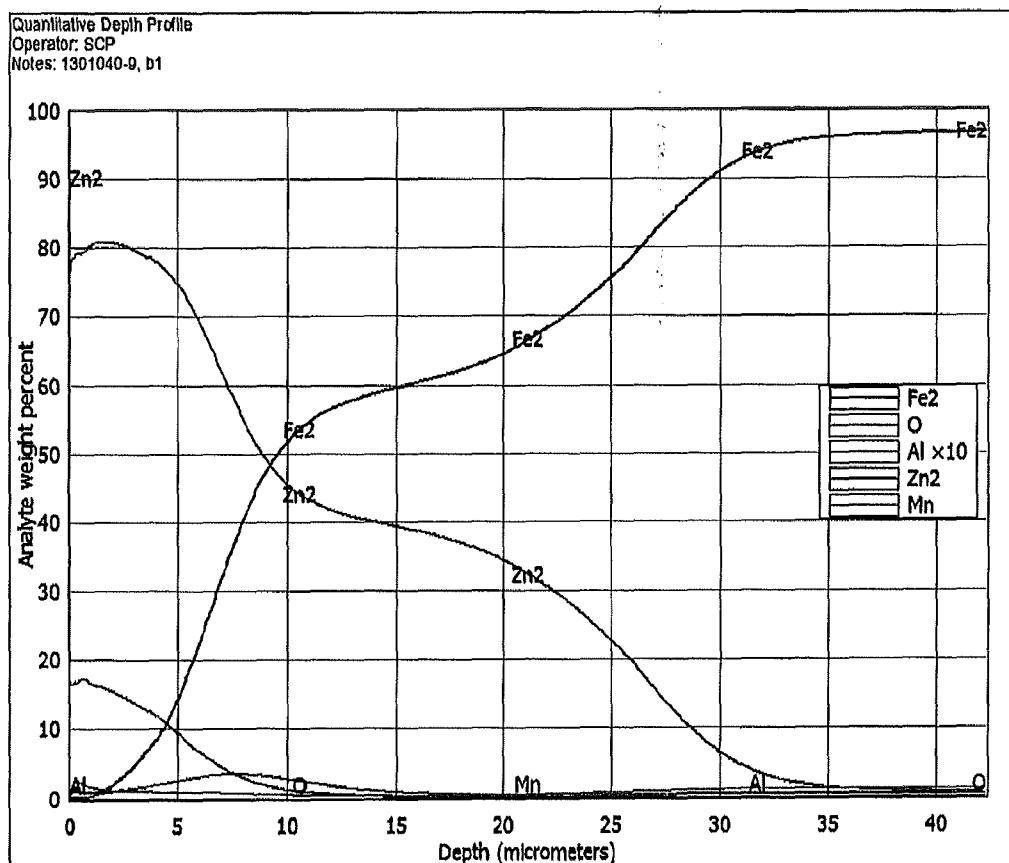


Figure 6A

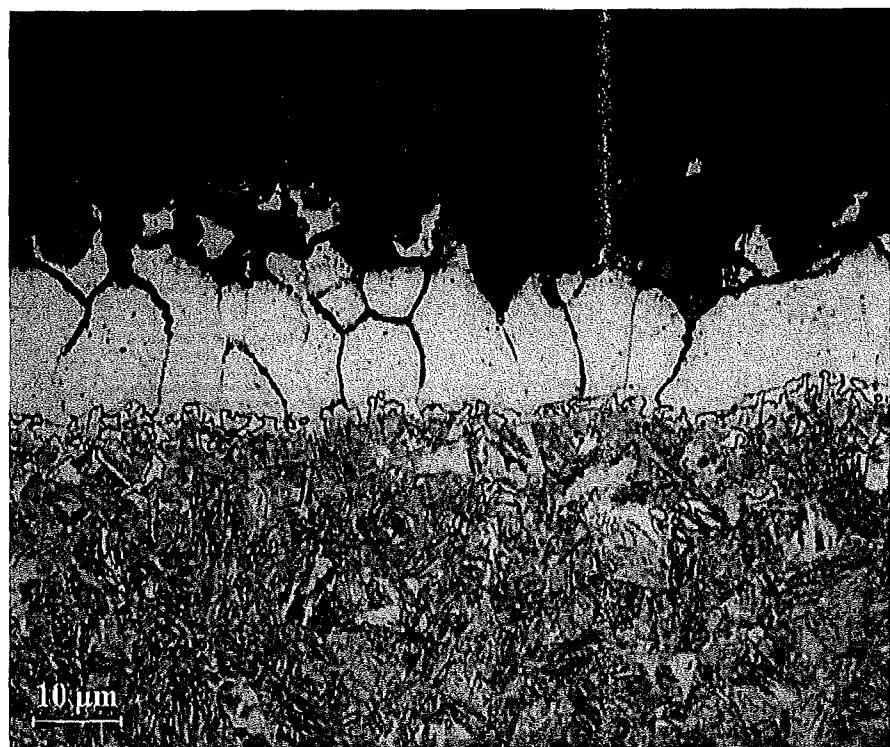


Figure 6B

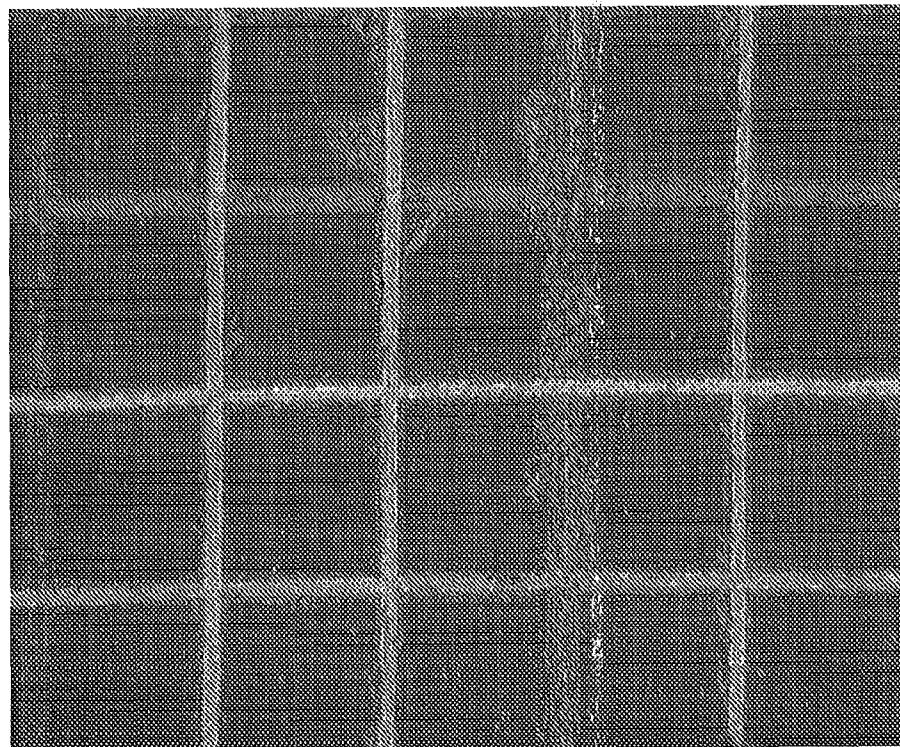


Figure 7

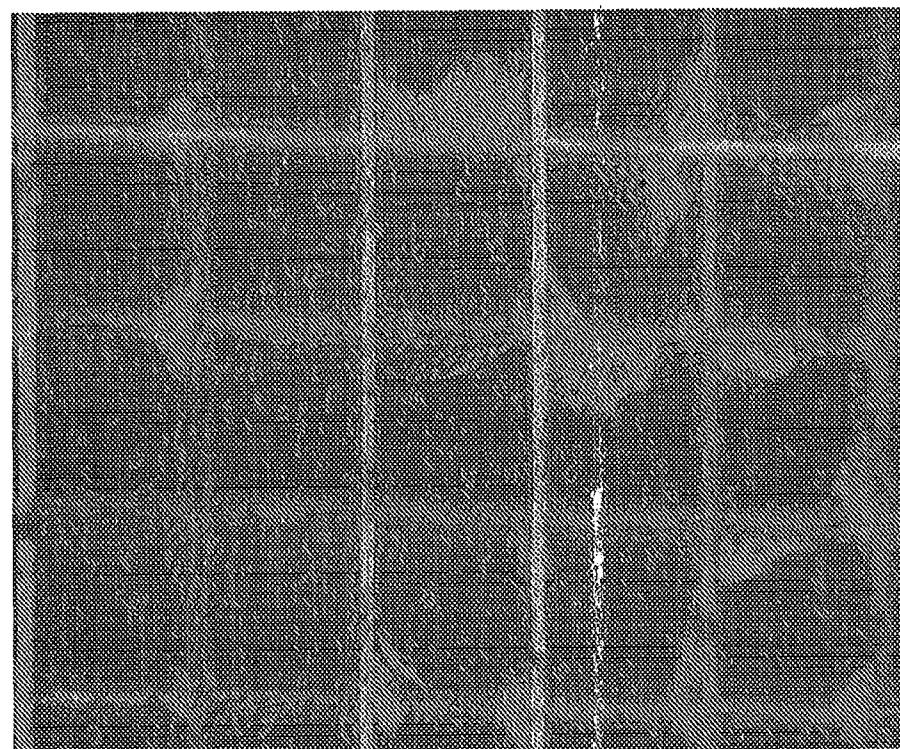


Figure 8

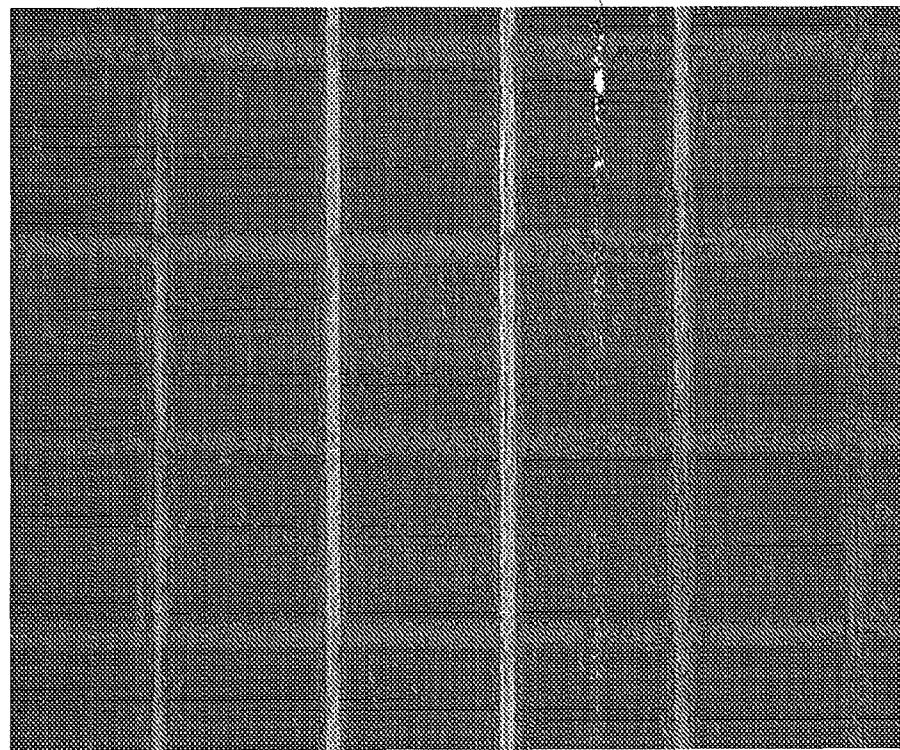


Figure 9