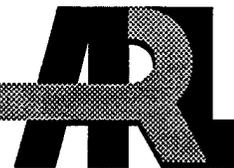


ARMY RESEARCH LABORATORY



Dynamic Consolidation of
Combustion Synthesized
Alumina-Titanium Diboride
Ceramic Composites

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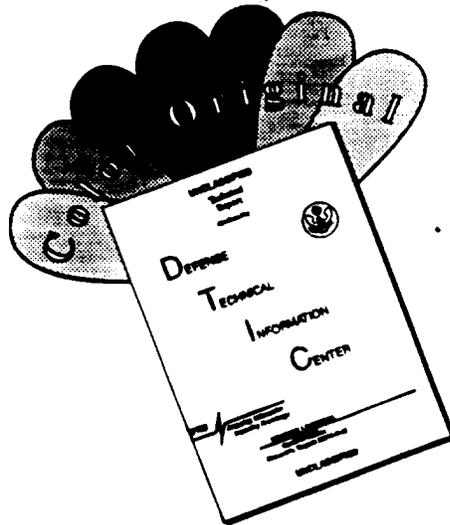
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1. INTRODUCTION

Ceramic-ceramic composites that successfully combine the advantageous properties of the individual components are of special interest to the ceramic industry. For example, when TiC or TiB₂ is combined with Al₂O₃, the composite, without a significant drop in overall microhardness, has better oxidation resistance (Matsushita, Hayashi, and Saito 1990; Tampieri, Landi, and Bellosi 1992; Cutler, Hurford, and Virkar, 1989; Ishigaki, Sato, and Moriyoshi 1989) and possesses superior mechanical strength (Kimura et al. 1989; Stadlbauer, Kladnig, and Gritzner 1989; Vershinnikov, Mamyran, and Georgiev 1993) and fracture toughness (Furukawa, Nakano, and Takashuna 1988) than TiC or TiB₂ alone. Typically, such ceramic materials are fabricated into monolithic structures by consolidating mixed precursor ceramic powders by either hot-pressing or hot-isostatic-pressing operations. Since the Al₂O₃-TiC and Al₂O₃-TiB₂ systems readily lend themselves to fabrication via combustion synthesis, both composites can be directly manufactured from their elemental and oxide/boride precursors. The focus of this report is the ceramic system that forms during the simultaneous reduction of the oxides of titanium and boron by aluminum.

Combustion-synthesis processing (also known as self-propagating high-temperature, SHS, or reaction synthesis) has been used extensively during the past three decades to form a wide spectrum of ceramic materials (Merzhanov 1990; Materials Research Society 1993; Metals Powder Industries Federation 1992; TMS 1992; Munir and Holt 1990). Generally, these ceramics are highly sensitive to minute levels of contaminants on the precursors, and, due to physical, thermodynamic, and kinetic factors associated with the process, the products usually contain high levels of porosity and exhibit extensive cracking. Consequently, the combustion-synthesized ceramics require some form of externally applied pressure to achieve complete densification. Reviews of the combustion synthesis process, its historical development, and basic characteristics can be found in McCauley (1990), Munir and Anselmi-Tamburini (1989), and Munir (1988).

The inherent porosity (sometimes as much as 50%) can be reduced if the reacted ceramic product is consolidated while it is at a temperature above the ductile-brittle transition temperature

or, in some cases, the melting point of the material. This densification step could be accomplished by a variety of conventional (slow) powder metallurgy methods such as hot-pressing or hot-isostatic-pressing or, alternatively, by more rapid techniques using high-pressure gases (Miyamoto, Koizumi, and Yamada 1984; Yamada, Miyamoto, and Koizumi 1987; Adachi et al. 1989; Nishida et al. 1993), hot-rolling (Rice et al. 1986), high-speed forges/presses (Hoke et al. 1992; Vecchio et al. 1992; LaSalvia, Meyer, and Meyers 1992; Misiolek, Schurman, and Sopchak 1992), or explosives (Niiler et al. 1988; Niiler, Kecskes, and Kottke 1990; Rabin, Korth, and Williamson 1990; Grebe et al. 1992; Wang, Wixom, and Thompson 1994).

The combustion synthesis dynamic consolidation (CS/DC) method for producing monolithic, full-density TiC and TiB₂ has been developed at the U.S. Army Research Laboratory (ARL), formerly the Ballistic Research Laboratory (Niiler et al. 1988; Niiler, Kecskes, and Kottke 1990). This technique where the two independent processes of CS and DC are effectively combined has been subsequently adapted to other binary ceramic systems (Kecskes, Benck, and Netherwood 1990). The relevant aspects of the CS/DC method and those of the resultant ceramics can be found elsewhere (Kecskes, Niiler, and Kottke 1990, 1993). To date, limited efforts have extended the applicability of this technique to more complex combustion synthesis systems such as TiC-TiB₂ (Kecskes et al. 1990; Kecskes, Kottke, and Puszynski, to be published) and TiC-Al₂O₃ (Rabin, Korth, and Williamson 1990).

The primary objective of this effort was to demonstrate that, with slight modifications, the CS/DC technique developed for combustion-synthesized TiC, TiB₂, and HfC can also be adapted to heterogeneous ceramic composite systems. The secondary objective was to identify the necessary modifications and determine the effects, on the fabricated Al₂O₃-TiB₂, of the various experimental conditions that were required for the successful reaction and consolidation of TiC and TiB₂. Specifically, the effects of sample configuration, sample confinement, reaction ignition-consolidation delay time (referred to as delay time hereafter), and explosive loading in the reaction/consolidation system were evaluated. The key features of the process, as well as some of the characteristics and properties of the Al₂O₃-TiB₂ ceramics produced, are described.

2. EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

The ARL reaction/consolidation assembly consists of two distinct components, the reaction fixture and the explosive driver package. The reaction fixture encompasses a thin-walled steel ring surrounded by a porous gypsum, $\text{CaSO}_4 \times 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$, (wallboard) container. This configuration allows the reaction to take place, maintains the reacted product at an elevated temperature, and serves as a crushable medium during consolidation. The explosive driver package consists of two high-hardness steel compression plates (Brinell Hardness of 480–530) and a suitable container for the powdered amatol explosive (80/20 $\text{NH}_4\text{NO}_3/\text{TNT}$) and functions to provide the high pressures needed to densify the reaction product.

The precursor powders consisted of high-purity, 99.7%, 15- to 19- μm , (Fisher sizing) grade 123, aluminum (Al) metal powder (ALCOA, Pittsburgh, PA), min. 98.5% purity, -250- μm (-60 Mesh) (Stock No. A76-500), reagent-grade boron trioxide (B_2O_3) (Fisher Chemicals, Pittsburgh, PA), and 99.0% purity, 0.3- μm (Stock No. T315-500), reagent-grade titanium dioxide (TiO_2) (Fisher Chemicals, Pittsburgh, PA). These powders were thoroughly dry-mixed under argon in an atomic ratio of 10:3:3 (Al: B_2O_3 : TiO_2). A cursory examination of the powders with scanning electron microscopy (SEM) (JEOL, Peabody, MA) and energy dispersive x-ray spectroscopy (EDS) (Noran Instruments, Middleton, WI) indicated that the powders were within the manufacturers' specifications. A backscattered electron image and Al and Ti EDS dot maps of the precursor powder mixture are shown in Figure 1. Although B_2O_3 was also present in the powder mixture, the characteristic boron and oxygen x-ray lines could not be observed due to absorption in the EDS detector window. As verified by the Al and Ti EDS dot maps, the extremely fine TiO_2 particles tend to adhere and coat the much larger Al particles in the mixture.

The powder mixture was uniaxially pressed at 45 MPa, to form cylindrical green compacts 50.8 mm in diameter with a height of about 25 mm. This green compact was inserted into a steel ring that was lined with a chemically inert Grafoil (Union Carbide, Cleveland, OH) sheet barrier to prevent external contamination of the sample. The compact was further thermally insulated from the steel plates with zirconia felt (Zircar Products, Inc., Florida, NY). An electric

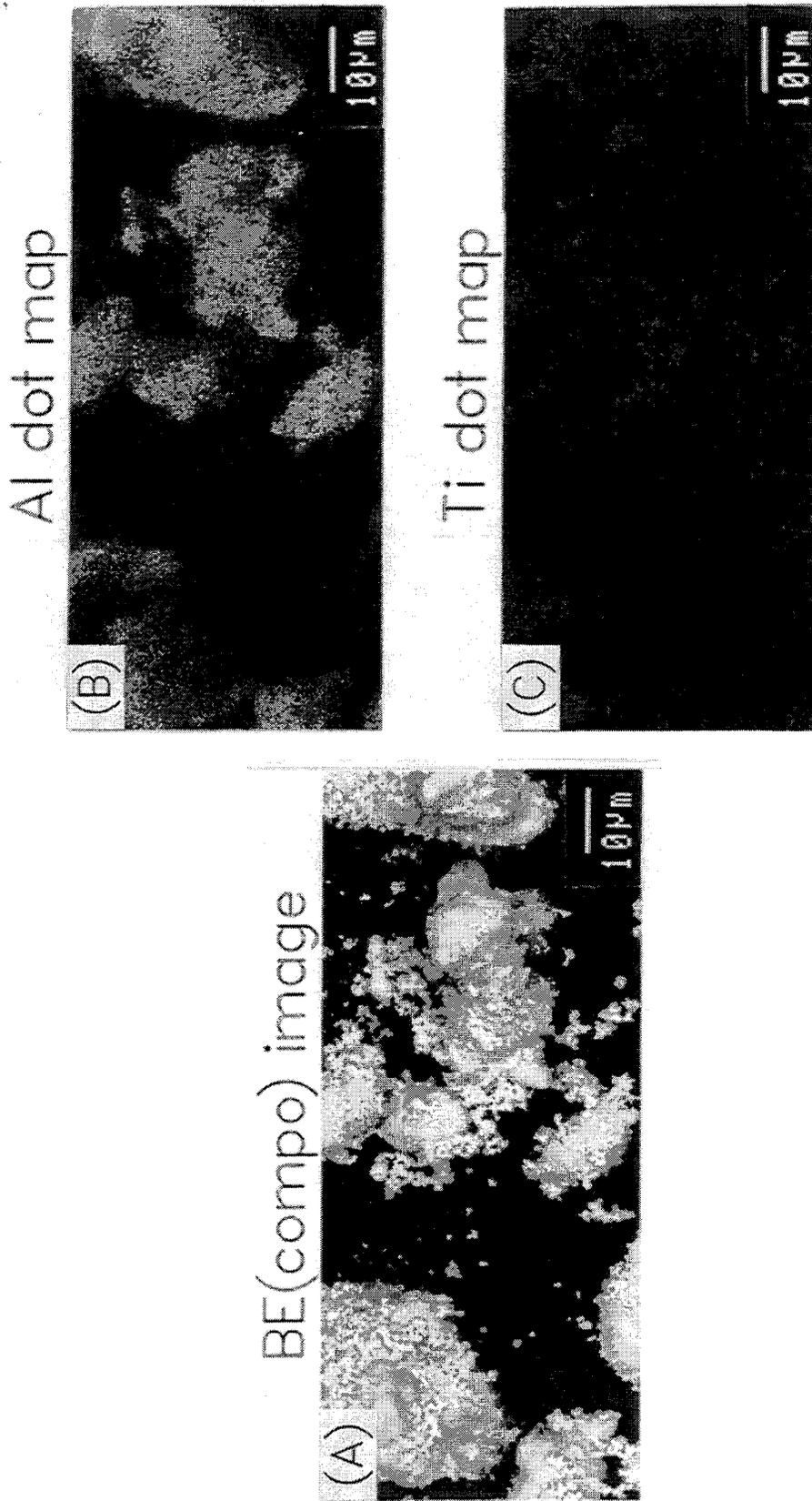


Figure 1. Backscattered electron micrograph of the precursor powder mixture in 1A, Al EDS dot map in 1B, and Ti EDS dot map in 1C.

match was placed at the center of the top of the compact, and a small amount of Ti-B igniter powder mixture was pressed into place around the electric match. The polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA) explosive driver package was loaded with the amatol charge and affixed to the top of the reaction fixture as the final step in the assembly procedure. The majority of the CS/DC experiments were performed with a c:m (explosive charge mass to compression plate mass) ratio of 0.22. A few preliminary experiments were also done with c:m ratios of 0.33 and 0.44.

Prior to firing, the SHS and explosive components were combined, and the reaction/consolidation assembly was placed on top of a 2- to 3-m-high sandpile. The electric match was activated, igniting the igniter mixture, which, in turn, ignited the green compact. The elapsed time between ignition of the CS reaction and the detonation of the explosive charge was varied from 4 to 59 s. The subsequent detonation compacted the hot $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\text{-TiB}_2$ pellet and drove the entire assembly several inches into the sand. The sample was allowed to cool in the sand for about 30–45 min prior to recovery. Detailed accounts of this procedure have been reported elsewhere (Niiler et al. 1988; Niiler, Kecskes, and Kottke 1990).

Following the removal of the steel ring and thermal insulation, the CS/DC ceramic disks were thoroughly cleaned. This ceramic material is conductive and can be cut by Electric Discharge Machining (EDM) (Metals Research Group, Monsey, NY). Each sample was sliced along a diameter. One half was vacuum-impregnated with epoxy and diamond-lapped to a 1/4- μm finish. The other half was sectioned further for microstructural analysis. A thin wafer was cut with EDM and then mounted and polished for optical, SEM, EDS, and microhardness measurements.

Sample densities were measured using Archimedes' Principle. The room-temperature sample microhardness was determined using a Knoop indenter with 100-g and 400-g test loads. Hardness values are averages of 15 individual measurements. Quoted error bars indicate the limit of error and are given as $\pm\sigma/n^{1/2}$, where σ is the standard deviation of the data set and n is the number of measurements. Additionally, a small portion of the central section was ground into fine powder for x-ray diffraction (XRD) analysis (Philips Electronic Instruments, Mahwah, NJ).

Finally, a fragment was broken off (by impact loading at room temperature) for evaluation of the sample's intergrain bonding and fracture characteristics.

The CS/DC experiments were preceded by an auxiliary experiment, which determined the time interval during which the material remained above its ductile-brittle transition temperature. This information was essential to ascertain whether this new ceramic material system could be successfully compacted and/or consolidated in the reaction/consolidation fixture. The experiment consisted of measurements of temperature and reaction rate of the reacting green compact.

A reaction fixture, identical to that used in the CS/DC experiments, was equipped with Type K (chromel-alumel) thermocouples and high- and low-temperature pyrometers to obtain the reaction velocity and peak temperatures in the fixture. See Figure 2 for a schematic of the arrangement. The pyrometers were aimed at a circumferential point at the axial midline of the compact. Two sets of dual thermocouples were also used for reaction rate measurements. One of these pairs had a thermocouple that was buried in the igniter mixture at the center of the sample's top surface. The other thermocouple of this pair was placed at the compact's edge. The second set of thermocouples was set up in a similar manner under the bottom of the compact (i.e., one at the bottom center of the disk and the other at its edge).

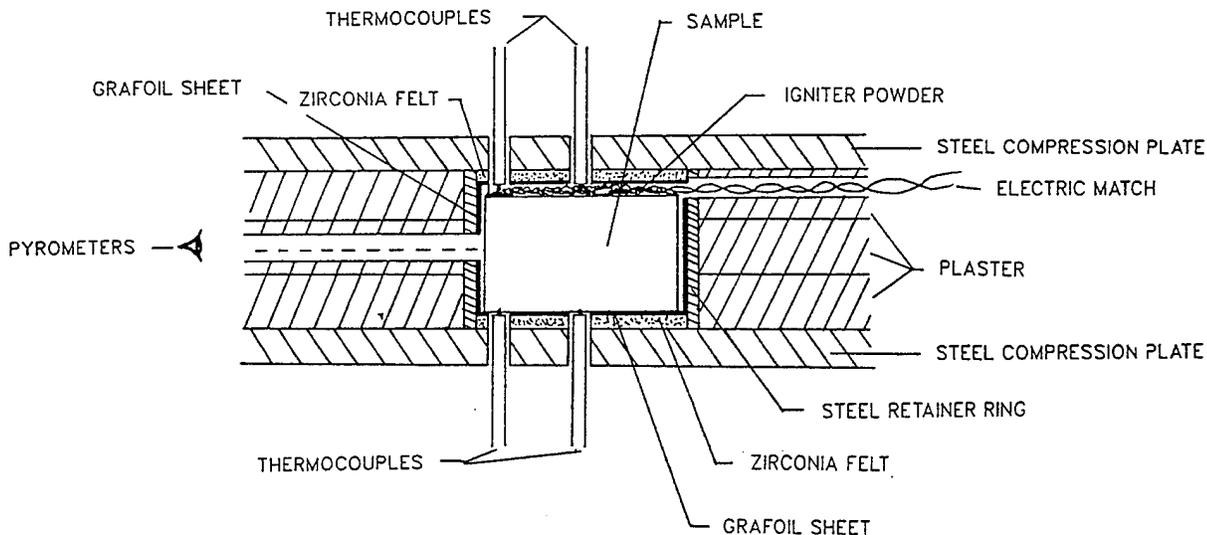


Figure 2. Schematic arrangement of the thermocouples and pyrometers in the temperature-time measurement.

The thermocouple emfs were inputted into a differential voltage amplifier whose output and those of the pyrometers were digitized with a 12-bit D/A converter. The D/A converter was a Metrabyte DAS-16 high-speed analog data acquisition system (Metrabyte Corporation, Taunton, MA). The combustion synthesis reaction was remotely initiated, and the reaction velocity and temperature profile of the reacting green compact were observed in real time on a video display terminal. The data were recorded and stored after the reacted sample cooled to ambient conditions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

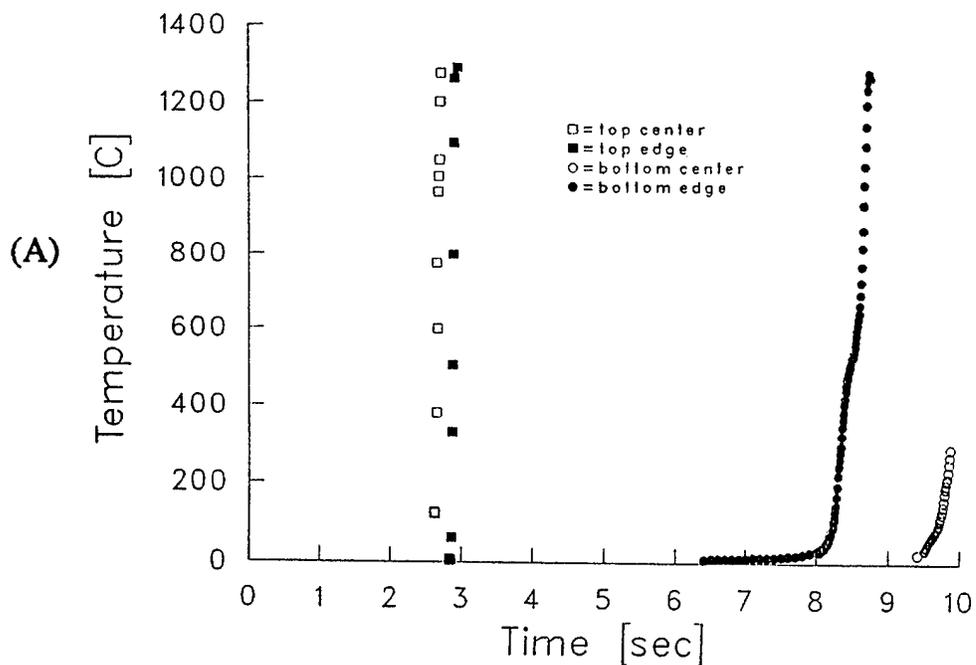
3.1 Auxiliary Temperature Measurement. The reaction mechanism of this three-component system is rather complex and has been extensively studied by Logan and coworkers (Logan, Price, and McLemore 1987; Logan, Sparrow, and McLemore 1990; Logan 1992). Aided with a diagrammatic representation in Figure 3, the following is a brief description, summarizing the rate controlling steps in the reduction of the oxides of boron and titanium by aluminum metal. The overall chemical reaction is given as:



The self-propagating combustion synthesis reaction begins with B_2O_3 melting at a low temperature of about 150°C ($T_m = 450^\circ \text{C}$) and wetting the TiO_2 and Al particles. With increasing temperatures, B_2O_3 forms a solid solution ($9\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\text{-}2\text{B}_2\text{O}_3$) with the Al_2O_3 surface layer on the Al particles. The Al continues to expand and eventually breaks or pushes out of the Al_2O_3 surface layer, exposing fresh Al. This happens because the coefficient of thermal expansion of Al is much greater than that of the Al_2O_3 . At the temperature corresponding to the melting point of Al ($T_m = 660^\circ \text{C}$), the fresh metal melts and oxidizes. Al_2O_3 is formed continuously while B and Ti are reduced by the aluminum from their oxide precursors. Once the Ti and B are free, the TiB_2 phase forms. A similar, though somewhat simpler, double reduction process has been associated with the three-component system of Al, C, and TiO_2 (Chrysathou et al. 1994; Kim and Lee 1989).

With a brief description of the reaction process in mind, results of the temperature-time measurements in the reaction fixture can now be discussed. Figure 4 shows the thermocouple and pyrometer data. The thermocouple reaction velocity data are shown in Figure 4A, and the pyrometer temperature data are illustrated in Figure 4B. In Figure 4A, the open and closed squares represent the thermocouples at the sample's top while the open and closed circles represent the thermocouples at the sample's bottom. As revealed by the very short time interval between the appearance of the open and closed squares, the reaction wavefront propagates

Contained Run of Al₂O₃-TiB₂ Composite



Contained Run of Al₂O₃-TiB₂ Composite

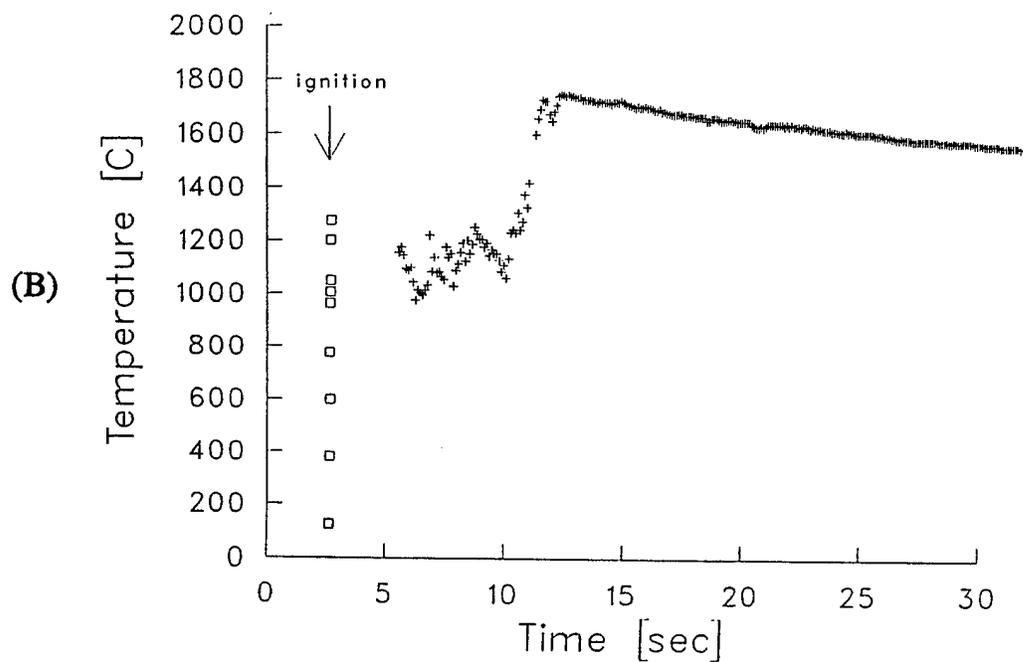


Figure 4. Temperature data for the Al₂O₃-TiB₂ system. Thermocouple data are shown in 4A, and pyrometer data are shown in 4B.

product cools very slowly. In fact, the surface remains above 1,200° C for at least 80 s, and at this temperature, the sample is still above the 1,000° C ductile-brittle transition temperature (DBTT) of Al₂O₃, although it is below the DBTT of TiB₂, 1,800° C.

The complexity of the three-component reaction process is reflected in the thermocouple and pyrometer traces. In particular, the thermocouples show that a primary reaction wave propagates through the compact in approximately 7.5 s. At 3 s after ignition, the pyrometer turns on in agreement with the speed of the primary wave. After a widely oscillatory behavior for 5 s, the peak temperature is reached at about 10 s after ignition. This is 2 s after the primary wave already passed through the entire compact. Recall that the pyrometers are pointed at the midline of the compact. This 2-s delay implies that the reaction takes several additional seconds to complete. Therefore, it may be concluded that the entire compact has reacted about 15 s after ignition.

It is very tempting to associate the pyrometer data with the various intermediate steps in the reaction process. Caution must be exercised, however. Specifically, during the intermediate stages of the reaction, the compact emits light, and the characteristic emission lines could well be in the optical frequency band of the pyrometer where the blackbody temperature is determined. Without an independent measurement of the emission spectrum of this system, and until true blackbody behavior is established, the association of an actual physical process with the pyrometer temperature traces should be avoided.

After the in-situ temperature measurement, the reacted (but uncompact) product or sponge was sectioned for analysis. The polished cross section of the reacted sponge and enlarged views of characteristic regions are shown in Figure 5. The macrophotograph in Figure 5A clearly shows that, at the top of the sponge, the periodic delaminations are parallel to one another. At the bottom, however, the delaminations have a pronounced curvature. This is consistent with the previously discussed thermocouple data, where the thermocouple at the sample's bottom edge registered the wave front arrival about 1.5 s before the thermocouple at the sample's bottom center. The increased speed along the surface of the compact is probably caused by a difference

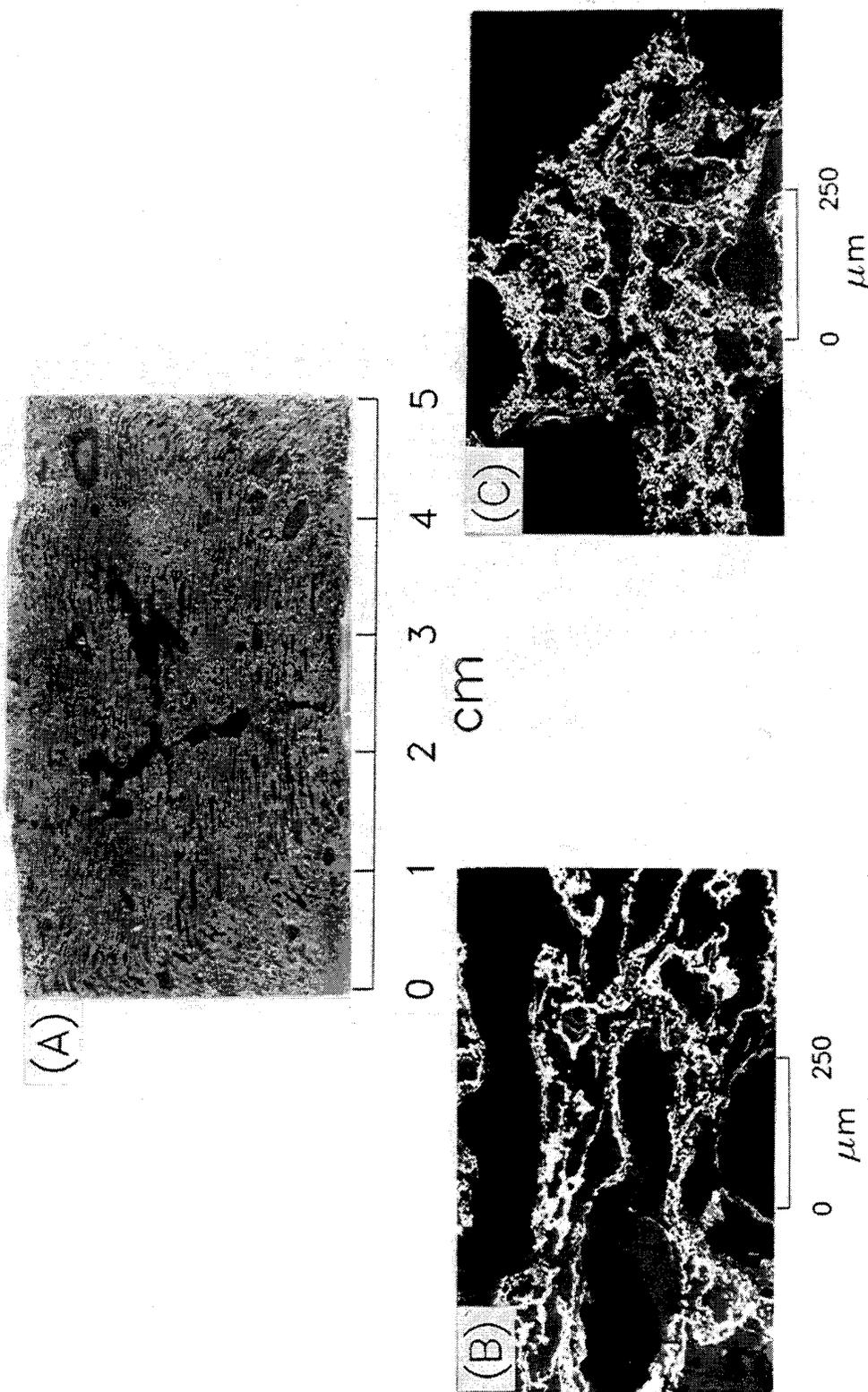


Figure 5. Macro photograph of the reacted, but uncompacted sample in 5A, with enlargements of typical microstructural features in 5B and 5C.

in the amount of oxygen available for the formation of Al_2O_3 . Whereas at the center, oxygen can come only from the B_2O_3 and TiO_2 , while at the edge, oxygen to form Al_2O_3 can come from B_2O_3 , TiO_2 , and the air in the reaction fixture.

The large voids interrupting the periodic delaminations of the sponge are a cause for concern. These voids appear throughout the reacted sponge, with a higher concentration at the center. The macrovoids are probably caused by the rapid melting and vaporization of the B_2O_3 (Logan, Price, and McLemore 1987; Logan, Sparrow, and McLemore 1990). Figures 5B and 5C are backscattered electron micrographs of typical regions found in the sample. The white regions are TiB_2 , the lighter grey regions are Al_2O_3 , and the dark grey-to-black regions are voids. The TiB_2 phase consists of individual hexagonal, platelet-like crystals dispersed in the Al_2O_3 phase. The dispersion consists of isolated crystals, crystal aggregates, and continuous, swirling bands of very fine crystallites. These crystallite bands are most likely a direct result of the very fine TiO_2 particles adhering to the surface of the Al particles.

3.2 CS/DC Experiments. The CS/DC experiments in the Al_2O_3 - TiB_2 composite system were conducted in a manner much like the empirical approach used in the CS/DC of the TiC and TiB_2 systems (Niiler et al. 1988; Niiler, Kecskes, and Kottke 1990). Preliminary experiments in which delay times were less than 5 s revealed that during consolidation, especially at higher c:m values (i.e., 0.33 and 0.44), the Al_2O_3 - TiB_2 ceramic spread beyond the confines of the steel retaining ring, resulting in an inferior product. It was concluded that the poor results from the use of this reaction/consolidation configuration were caused by three factors: (1) the unusually long duration of the SHS reaction, (2) the relatively low melting point of the Al_2O_3 phase, and (3) slower cooling caused by the low thermal conductivity of Al_2O_3 . Consequently, it was postulated that densification could be improved if the product's stiffness was increased. In the thermally passive reaction/consolidation fixture, this could be simply accomplished by allowing the sample to cool through a longer delay time than used in previous experiments.

The CS/DC samples were about 12 mm thick and 51 mm in diameter. A typical sample is shown in Figure 6 with the steel retaining ring, Grafoil barrier, and some zirconia insulation still

Top view



(A)

Bottom view



(B)

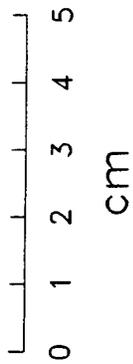


Figure 6. Typical CS/DC Al_2O_3 -TiB₂ sample with top and bottom views shown in 6A and 6B, respectively.

adhering to the ceramic. Figures 6A and 6B show the top and bottom views, respectively. The CS/DC sample densities and microhardnesses are tabulated in Table 1. Also included in the table are the delay time, or t_d , and the sample temperature, T_c (as inferred from the auxiliary measurement), at the time of consolidation.

Table 1. Al_2O_3 - TiB_2 Sample Density and Microhardness

Sample	t_d^a (s)	T_c^b (°C)	Density (g/cm ³)	HK	
				100-g	400-g (GPa)
S59	4.2	1,100	2.37	25.5 ±1.3	17.1 ±1.2
S54	11.4	1,700	2.74	29.4 ±2.2	14.9 ±0.8
S57	12.1	1,700	2.64	29.4 ±2.6	14.6 ±0.6
S58	16.8	1,650	3.03	26.2 ±2.3	13.7 ±0.7
S60	38.9	1,480	3.60	23.6 ±1.6	13.6 ±0.6
S61	58.8	1,390	3.55	26.3 ±2.0	14.3 ±0.6

^a Reaction ignition-consolidation delay time.

^b Sample temperature at time of consolidation (from auxiliary measurement).

Because the product sponge remains at elevated temperatures for an extended period of time, the possibility of thermal decomposition of the Al_2O_3 and TiB_2 phases must be addressed. XRD analysis identified the major phases as α - Al_2O_3 and TiB_2 and detected the presence of small amounts of α - SiO_2 . The results are summarized in Table 2. No peaks from the precursors were observed. The samples may still have been subject to thermal decomposition, but, if so, the effect was below the XRD detection limit. The tabulated values represent the ratio of the principal peak intensity of each of the listed phases to that of TiB_2 . The average intensity ratio of the two major phases (most intense peak) is 0.68 ± 0.10 . The larger deviation of the ratio for the S60 sample is not understood. The peak intensity of SiO_2 , however, generally decreases with increasing delay time and sample density. The source of SiO_2 is discussed later.

Table 2. X-ray Diffraction Results of Al₂O₃-TiB₂ Samples

Sample	T _d (s)	Peak Intensity Ratio		
		TiB ₂	Al ₂ O ₃	SiO ₂
S59	4.2	1.00	0.77	0.10
S54	11.4	1.00	0.63	0.20
S57	12.1	1.00	0.72	0.12
S58	16.8	1.00	0.70	0.10
S60	38.9	1.00	0.48	0.07
S61	58.8	1.00	0.78	0.04

Based on the XRD data, it is not unreasonable to assume that sample composition remains thermally stable with time. If the composites' compositions do not change, then their densities can be normalized to a single theoretical density. The results shown in Figure 7 indicate an improvement from less than 60% to close to 90% of the theoretical density. It may be noted that a similar but lesser effect was found in the consolidation of TiC (Grebe et al. 1992). The horizontal line in the figure represents 4.14 g/cm³, the theoretical density of the composite. Most of the increase in density occurs between delay times of 4 and 30 s, leveling off at longer t_d.

Macrophotographs of the polished cross sections from the CS/DC samples are shown in Figure 8. From the figure, the consolidated product structures can be grouped into three categories. In the first, for delay times less than the time at which the peak temperature is reached, t_p (as apparent in the sample consolidated at 4.2 s), the sample still retains a generally laminar profile. (Note: In Figure 4, the peak temperature of 1,750° C is attained at a delay time of 10 s.) In the second, for a t_d between t_p and 20 s, the smaller lenticular voids of the product sponge coalesce into larger macro-voids, while at the same time, an outer, denser zone begins to form (see samples consolidated at 11.4, 12.1, and 16.8 s). For t_d values longer than 20 s, the relative amount of this zone continues to increase, but the interior of the sample, even at 38.9 s, remains quite porous. Finally, at 58.8 s, the sample contains no macro-voids and appears to be

SHS/DC Al₂O₃-TiB₂
Density Dependence

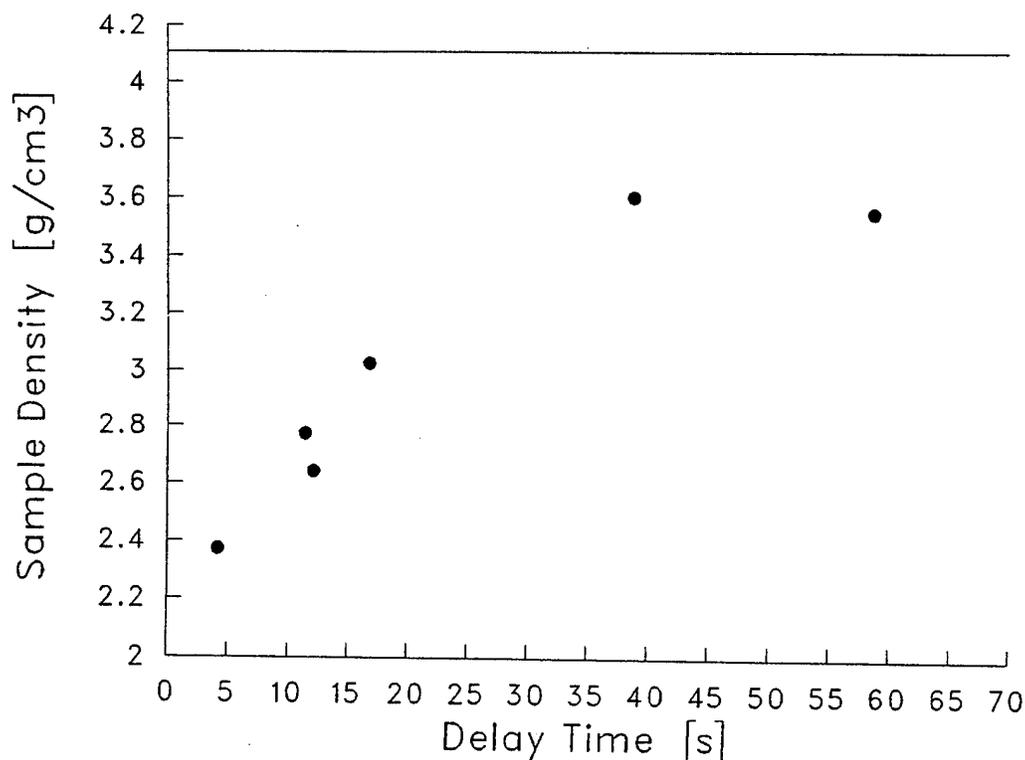


Figure 7. Al₂O₃-TiB₂ sample density vs. delay time.

solid. It is interesting to note that the sample densities at 38.9 s and 58.8 s are about the same. A possible explanation of this fact may be that the 38.9-s sample contains higher levels of open porosity.

As shown in Figure 9, backscattered electron micrographs of central regions of the samples are in fairly good agreement with the observation of the overall product development. An explanation of the laminar structure of the sample consolidated at 4.2 s (see Figure 9A) is quite straightforward. At the time of consolidation, the combustion synthesis reaction is still ongoing

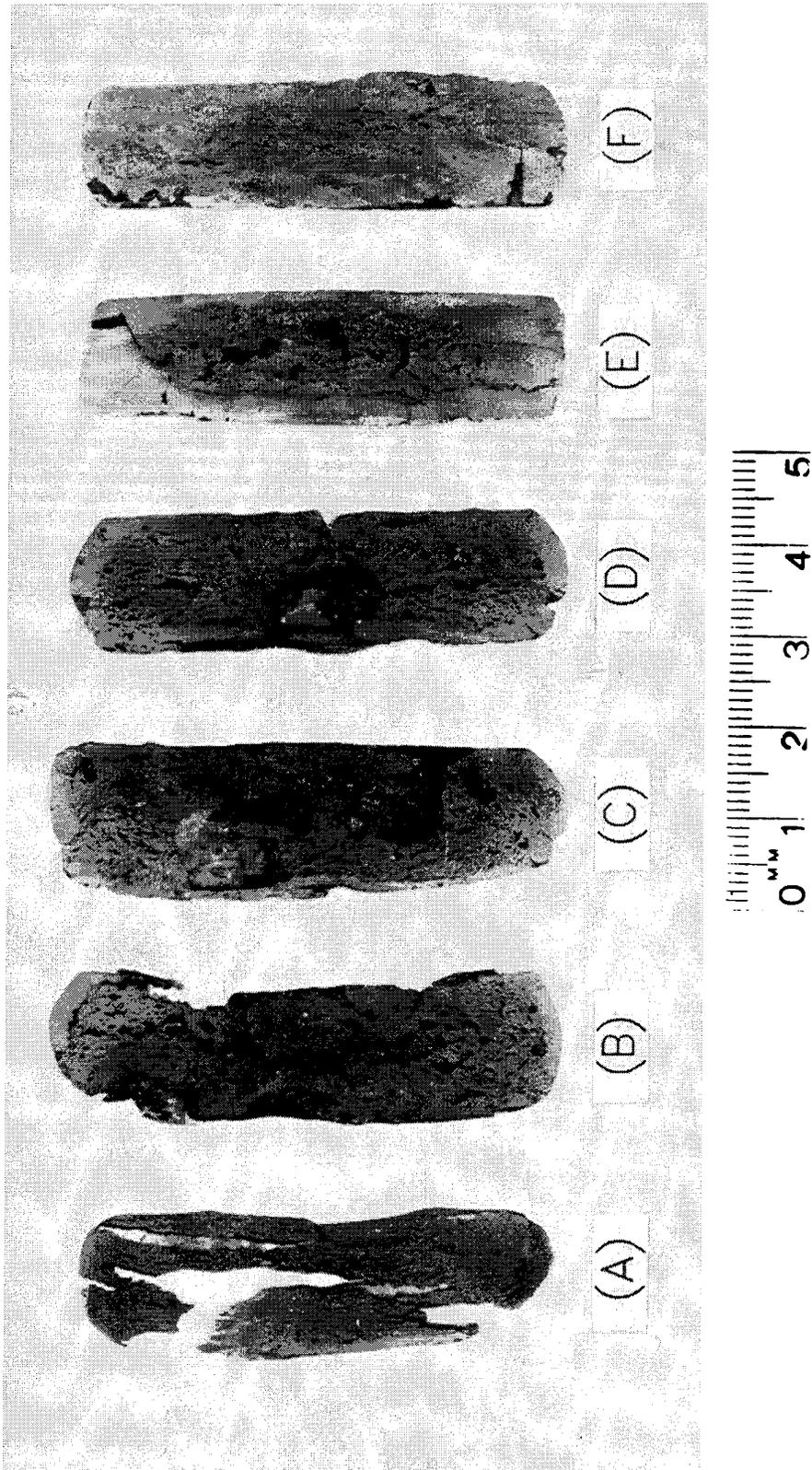


Figure 8. Optical microphotographs of polished cross sections of the samples with a t_d of 4.2 s in 8A, 11.4 s in 8B, 12.1 s in 8C, 16.8 s in 8D, 38.9 s in 8E, and 58.8 s in 8F.

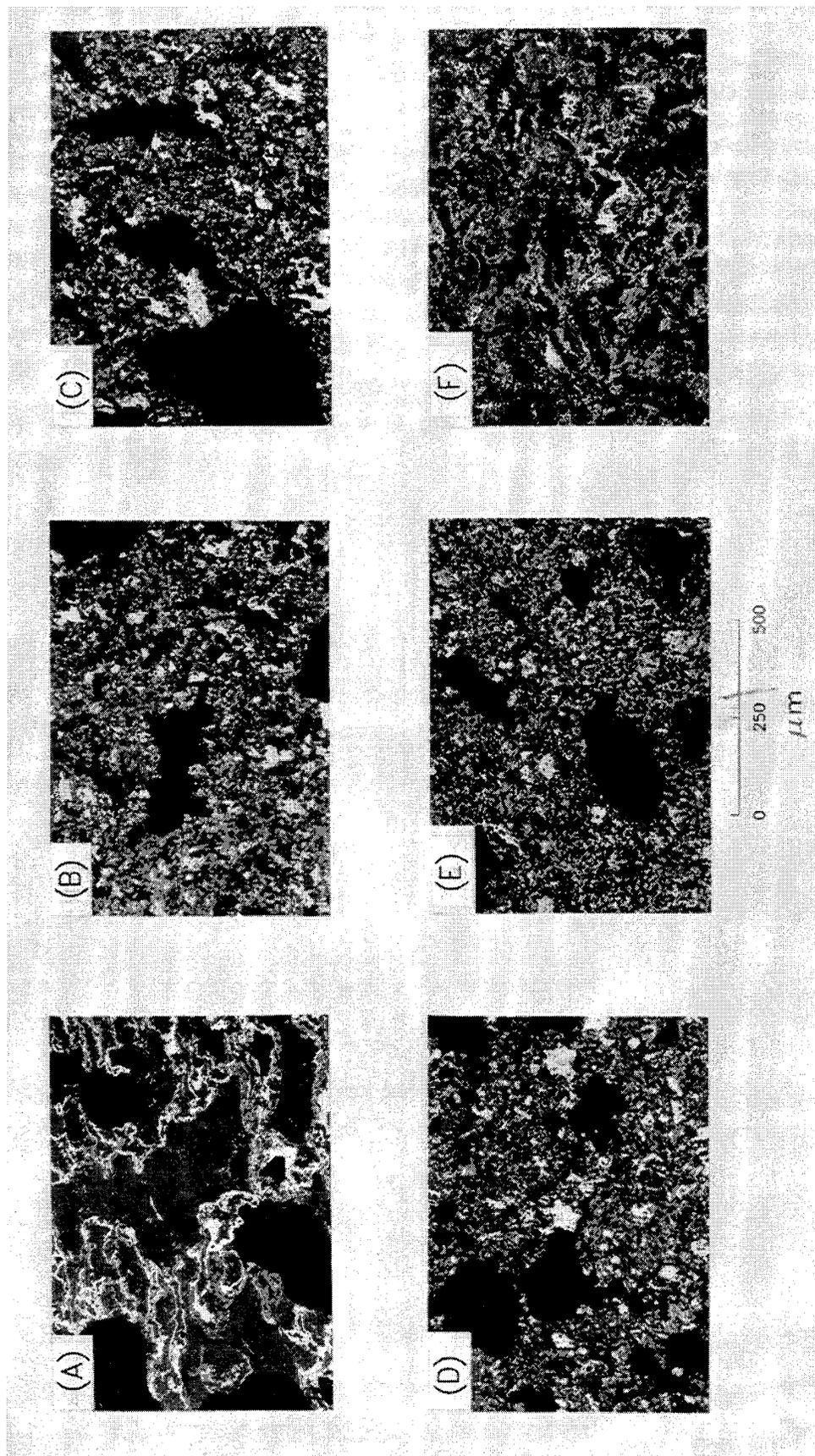


Figure 9. Backscattered electron micrographs of the $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\text{-TiB}_2$ samples with a t_d of 4.2 s in 9A, 11.4 s in 9B, 12.1 s in 9C, 16.8 s in 9D, 38.9 s in 9E, and 58.8 s in 9F.

and continues after the consolidation event, leaving the characteristic laminar structure of the uncompacted product sponge. In the four intermediate samples, Figures 9B, 9C, 9D, and 9E, the TiB_2 crystals are dispersed differently. The fine bands of TiB_2 swirls are absent, and the crystals are now found in aggregates only. With the temperature rise generated during consolidation, the Al_2O_3 phase may undergo melting that causes the fine bands of TiB_2 crystals to coalesce into larger aggregates. As shown in Figure 9F, at the other extreme of the time scale (at 58.8 s), the swirling pattern is again more dominant. Possibly, at a t_d of 58.8 s, the sample has cooled further and the additional shock energy is able to close the open porosity of the uncompacted sponge but is insufficient to bring about a change in the distribution of either phase.

The segregation and distribution of the TiB_2 phase in the CS/DC samples not only depends on the delay time but also varies with location in the sample. A comparison of the edge to the central region of one of the intermediate density samples (S60) is shown in Figure 10. In the uncompacted product sponge, the TiB_2 bands and small aggregates appeared everywhere. From this figure, it is clear that during consolidation a separation occurs. At the center of the sample (Figure 10A), there are TiB_2 aggregates only, but at the edge (Figure 10B), the band pattern of finer TiB_2 grains is more dominant. The spatial separation may be explained in terms of the local heat content of the samples. In the cooler edge zones, due to greater heat losses to the surroundings, neither phase can melt to allow recrystallization. In contrast, at the center, heat is retained longer and segregation could occur. That is, while the Al_2O_3 phase at the edges is only ductile, at the center it may be flowing plastically. The smaller degree of aggregation is probably the reason for the decreased porosity at the edges relative to the center of the sample. The smaller TiB_2 grains are easier to displace during consolidation than the larger aggregates. This, in turn, may account for the more uniform profile of the sample consolidated at 58.8 s.

The mechanical integrity of the CS/DC Al_2O_3 - TiB_2 samples was assessed by SEM examination of fracture surfaces and by microhardness measurements. As shown in Figure 11, the failure mode of the samples does not change significantly with increasing delay times. This is evident in the transgranular fracture of the Al_2O_3 grains (dark grey) and the intergranular fracture between TiB_2 grains (white to light grey). (Note that in all three samples the Al_2O_3

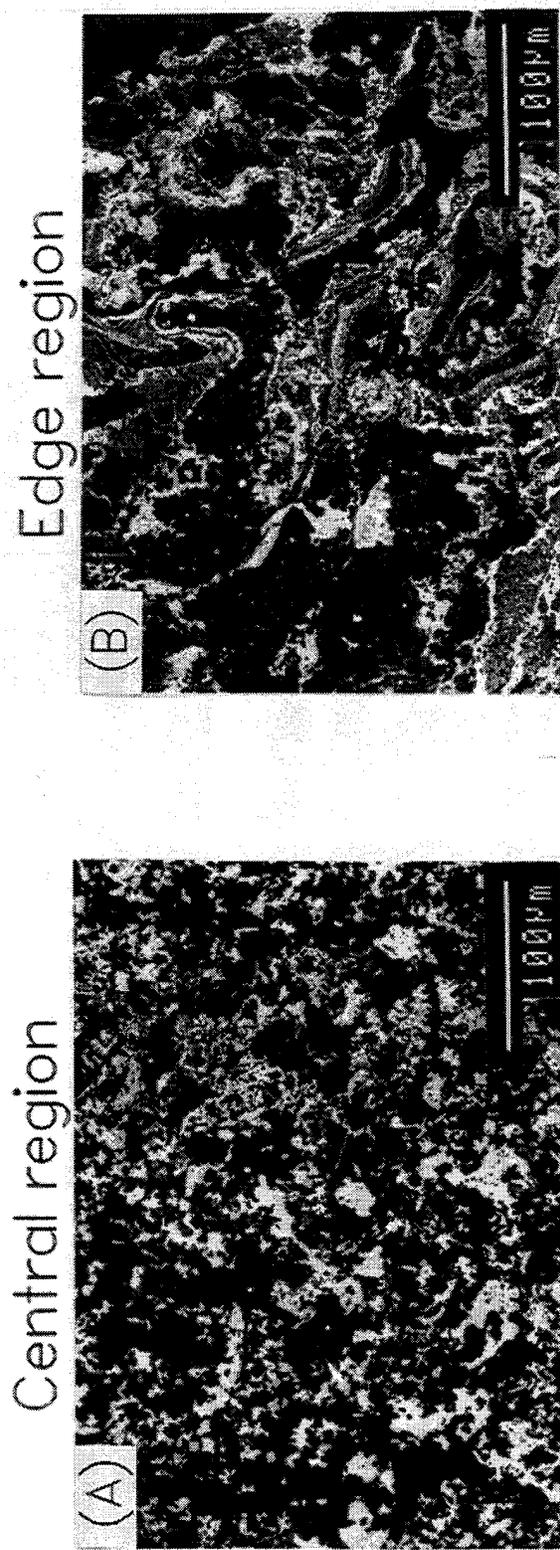


Figure 10. Degree of aggregation and intermixing of the Al_2O_3 and TiB_2 phases in the S60 (38.9 s) sample. The central region is shown in 10A, and the edge is shown in 10B.

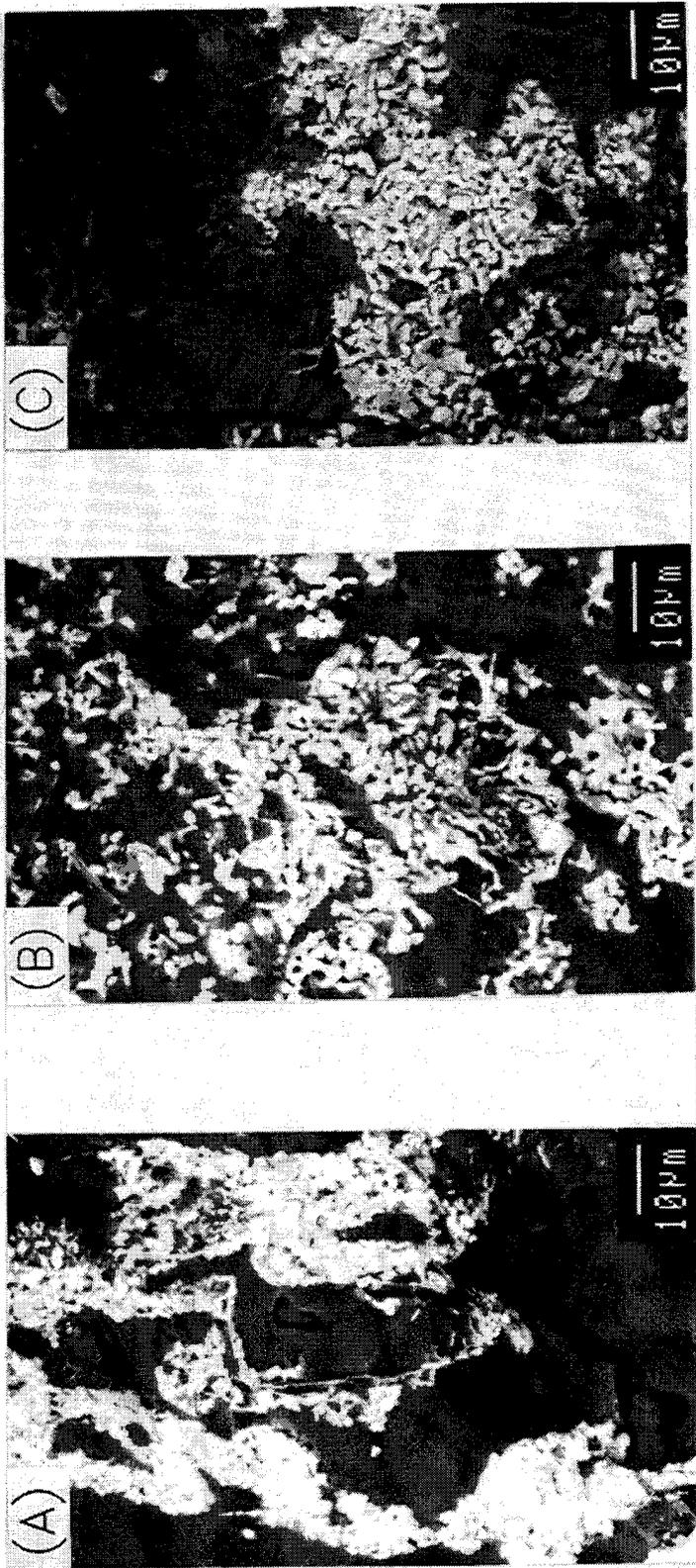


Figure 11. Characteristics fracture surfaces of the $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\text{-TiB}_2$ samples. The S59 (4.2 s) sample shown in 11A, the S57 (1.4 s) sample in 11B, and the S60 (38.9 s) sample in 11C.

grains failed in the transgranular mode, nevertheless, the appearance of the grain surfaces can range from those of being cleaved to those of being striated.) The intergrain bonding of the Al_2O_3 phase appears to be stronger than that of the TiB_2 phase. The intergranular separation of the TiB_2 grains reveals small pores trapped between the individual TiB_2 crystals of the aggregate. Also note the small amount of sintering and lack of grain growth within the TiB_2 aggregates.

These aggregates contain individual TiB_2 crystals that are an order of magnitude smaller than the Al_2O_3 grains. This large size difference between the TiB_2 and Al_2O_3 is mainly caused by the size of the TiO_2 precursor. Because of its low melting point, Al is liquid at the reaction temperatures. Therefore, it is expected that its size will not affect the size of the Al_2O_3 grains (Logan, Price, and McLemore 1987; Logan, Sparrow, and McLemore 1990). However, as evident in Figures 1 and 11, the size of the TiO_2 particles has a strong influence on the size of the TiB_2 grains. Due to the constraints imposed by the rapid post-consolidation cooling, the relatively low temperatures attained in the CS/DC fixture, and the high melting point of TiB_2 , grain growth is likely to be limited. While a fine-grained composite is highly desirable, small grains may not develop strong intergranular bonding if there are impurities present or insufficient heat is available for sample sintering.

As expected, Knoop microhardness measurements yielded values that are considerably higher than those of pure Al_2O_3 but much lower than those of pure TiB_2 . With increasing delay time, there is a slight decrease in both 100-g and 400-g hardness values. The reduction in microhardness may be due to a possible weakness of intergranular bonds between the TiB_2 crystals. It is speculated that the weaker bonding of the samples with longer delay times may be caused by two concurrent factors. First, at elevated temperatures, the porous sponge is highly susceptible to contamination from external sources. Small amounts of impurities are known to degrade the mechanical properties of hard solids (Kny and Ortner 1986). Likewise, after consolidation, if still porous, the CS/DC sample continues to remain vulnerable to contamination. Second, although generally inhibited by the presence of Al_2O_3 , the high-temperature oxidation of TiB_2 in air is thermodynamically favored (Matasushita, Hayashi, and Saito 1990; Tampieri, Landi, and Bellosi 1992; Cutler, Hurford, and Virkar 1989; Ishigaki, Sato, and Moriyoshi 1989).

That is, intergrain bond degradation can be caused by the incomplete conversion of reactants to products.

Evidence of these factors is found by XRD analysis as well as SEM/EDS examination of the samples. Typical examples of contamination and nonuniformity are shown in Figure 12. A backscattered electron micrograph of a TiB_2 aggregate is shown in Figure 12A. The bright grain boundary regions are trapped foreign species. EDS spot analysis identified Zr, Si, and Fe. The source of Si, of course, is the sand from the sandpile used in the compaction experiments. Recall that the normalized peak intensity of $\alpha\text{-SiO}_2$ decreases with increasing density or, conversely, with decreasing porosity (see Table 2). As expected, a decrease in the residual porosity decreases the contamination. Fe is also likely to be from the sand, while Zr is probably from the ZrO_2 felt. A backscattered electron micrograph in Figure 12B illustrates another type of nonuniformity found within some of the TiB_2 grain clusters. While this figure appears much like that shown in Figure 12A, EDS spot analysis of the bright grain boundary regions detected Ti only. Neither B nor O can be detected in the EDS analyzer because their characteristic x-rays are absorbed in the detector window. However, because brighter regions correspond to higher average atomic number in a backscatter image, it may be concluded that these regions are most likely TiO_2 . Possible sources of excess TiO_2 could be either trapped, unreacted precursor powder remnants or the result of surface oxidation of the microfine TiB_2 grains.

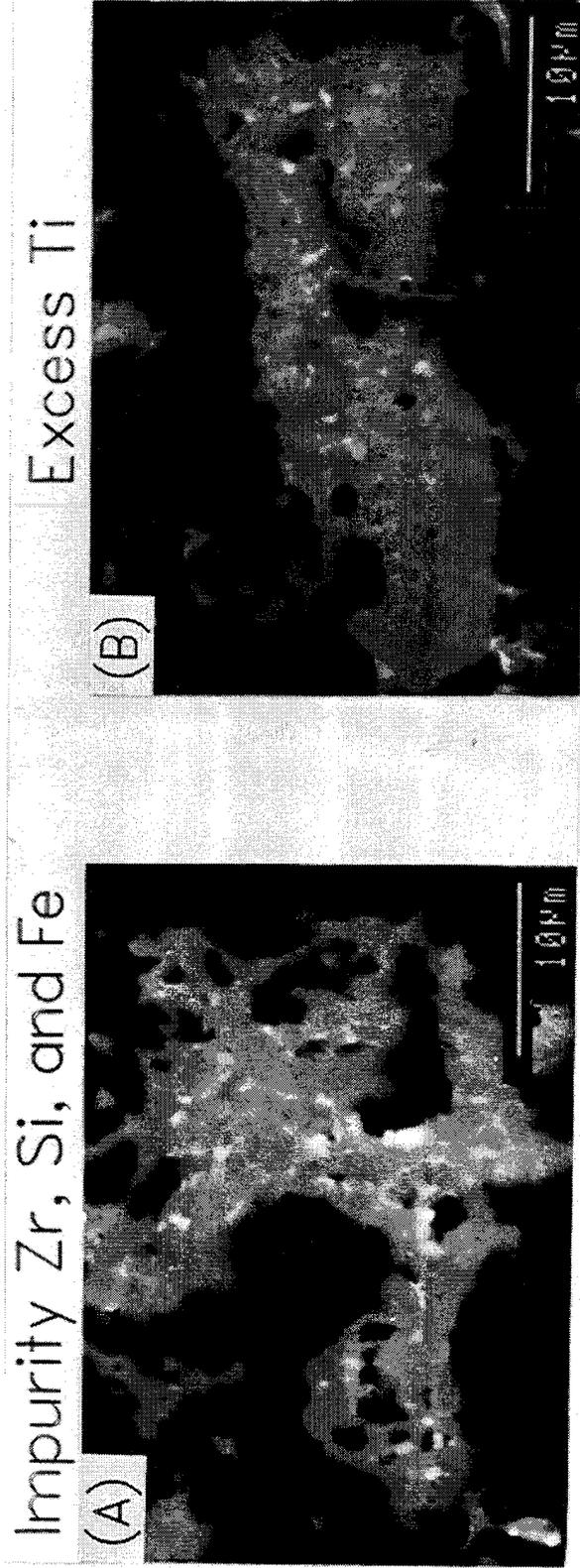


Figure 12. Inhomogeneity of the Al_2O_3 - TiB_2 samples. External contamination is shown in 12A, and incomplete conversion of reactants to products is shown in 12B.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It has been demonstrated that the CS/DC technique, developed for TiC and TiB₂ systems, can also be applied to the Al₂O₃-TiB₂ ceramic system. Due to the large difference between the melting points of the Al₂O₃ and TiB₂ phases, the latter system presents more difficulties and does not correlate well with the former systems. That is, the applicability of the critical process variables, identified for TiC and TiB₂, is significantly restricted. Sample densities of 90% TD can be attained by varying the reaction ignition-consolidation delay time. The measurement of the temperature-time history of the combustion synthesis reaction and an understanding of the reaction mechanism are necessary to determine the appropriate delay time for maximizing the sample density. Successful consolidation of the Al₂O₃-TiB₂ composite ceramic depends on the capacity of the ceramic to cool sufficiently so that it shifts from the plastic into the ductile deformation regime.

These CS/DC samples consist of a continuous Al₂O₃ phase and a much finer, well-dispersed phase of TiB₂ single crystal clusters. The TiB₂ grain size is found to be strongly linked to that of the precursor TiO₂. Samples exhibit relatively high hardness values, but, as reflected in the incongruent failure mode of the Al₂O₃ and TiB₂ phases, intergrain bonding is relatively weak. The less-than-adequate intergrain bonding is related to the residual porosity and resultant high sensitivity of the CS/DC sample to post-compaction contamination from surrounding insulating media and sand. The intergrain bonding and limited grain growth of the TiB₂ crystals demonstrate that the overall effect of contaminant phases is to weaken intergrain bonding by the prevention of sintering and grain growth.

Several modifications can easily be proposed to improve sample characteristics. An increase in sample density could be accomplished by using of higher c:m values coupled with the strengthening of the confinement fixture. Similarly, further dispersion of the TiB₂ phase and the control of the TiB₂ grain size could be achieved by improved precursor mixing and using larger TiO₂ precursor powder. An improvement in the fixture design to significantly reduce contamination from external sources would greatly improve the utility of the CS/DC process to fabricate Al₂O₃-TiB₂ ceramics.

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