Heat Treating Copper Beryllium Parts

Heat treating is key to the versatility of the copper beryllium alloy system. Unlike other copper base alloys which acquire their strength through cold work alone, wrought copper beryllium obtains its strength, conductivity, and hardness through a combination of cold work and a thermal process called age hardening. Age hardening is often referred to as precipitation hardening or heat treating. The ability of these alloys to accept this heat treatment results in forming and mechanical property advantages not available in other alloys. For example, intricate shapes can be fabricated when the material is in its ductile, as rolled state and subsequently age hardened to the highest strength and hardness levels of any copper base alloy.

Heat treating the copper beryllium alloys is a two step process which consists of solution annealing and age hardening. Because Materion Brush Performance Alloys performs the required solution anneal on all wrought products prior to shipping, most fabricators' primary concern is the age hardening process. The following text details this process and overviews the available copper beryllium alloys. Specific heat treating procedures for Wrought and Cast products, recommended heat treating equipment, surface oxidation information, and general solution annealing practices are also included.

COPPER BERYLLIUM ALLOYS

Copper beryllium alloys are available in two basic classes (Table 1): *High Strength Copper Beryllium* offers high strength with moderate to good conductivity; and *High Conductivity Copper Beryllium* features maximum conductivity and slightly lower strength levels.

High Strength Copper Beryllium		High Conductivity Copper Beryllium	
Wrought	Cast	Wrought	Cast
25 (C17200) 190 (C17200)* 290 (C17200) M25 (C17300) 165 (C17000)	275C (C82800) 20C (C82500) 21C (C82510 165C (C82400)	3 (C17510) 10 (C17500) 174 (C17410)* Brush 60 (C17460)* 390 (C17460)*	3C (C82200)

* These alloys are supplied only in the mill hardened condition and require no further heat treatment.

Table 1. Copper Beryllium Alloys, Materion Brush Performance Alloys Designations and UNS Numbers

Both the *High Strength* and *High Conductivity* Copper Beryllium are available as strip in the heat treatable and mill hardened tempers. Mill hardened tempers are supplied in the heat treated condition and require no further heat treatment.

Copper beryllium is produced in tempers ranging from solution annealed (A) to an as rolled condition (H). Heat treating maximizes the strength and conductivity of these alloys. The temper designations of the standard age hardenable copper beryllium tempers are shown in Table 2.

Materion Brush Performance Alloys Designation	ASTM Designation	Description
A	TB00	Solution annealed
1/4 H	TD01	Cold worked, Quarter hard
1/2 H	TD02	Cold worked, Half hard
3/4 H	TD03	Cold worked, Three-quarter hard
H	TD04	Cold worked, hard
AT 1/4 HT 1/2 HT 3/4 HT HT	TF00 TH01 TH02 TH03 TH04	The suffix "T" added to Materion Brush Performance Alloys temper designations indicates that the material has been age hardened by the standard heat treatment.

Table 2. Temper Designations, Alloys 25 strip and wire

AGE HARDENING COPPER BERYLLIUM ALLOYS

Copper beryllium achieves its maximum levels of strength, hardness, and conductivity through age hardening. During the age hardening process, microscopic, beryllium rich particles are formed in the metal matrix. This is a diffusion controlled reaction, and the strength will vary with aging time and temperature.

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Recommended or standard age hardening time and temperature combinations have been determined for each copper beryllium alloy. These standard times and temperatures allow parts to reach peak strength in two to three hours, without the risk of strength decrease due to extended temperature exposure. As an example, the Alloy 25 response curves in Figure 1 indicate how low, standard, and high aging temperatures affect both peak properties and the time required for the alloy to reach peak strength.

In Figure 1, at the low temperature of 550°F (290°C), the strength of Alloy 25 increases slowly, and peak strength is not reached until approximately 30 hours. At the standard temperature of 600°F (315°C), Brush Alloy 25 exhibits virtually no change in strength after three hours of exposure. At 700°F (370°C), peak strength is reached in 30 minutes and declines almost immediately. In short, as aging temperature increases, the time necessary to reach peak strength decreases, as does maximum obtainable strength. This response is similar for all copper beryllium alloys, but at different standard temperatures.

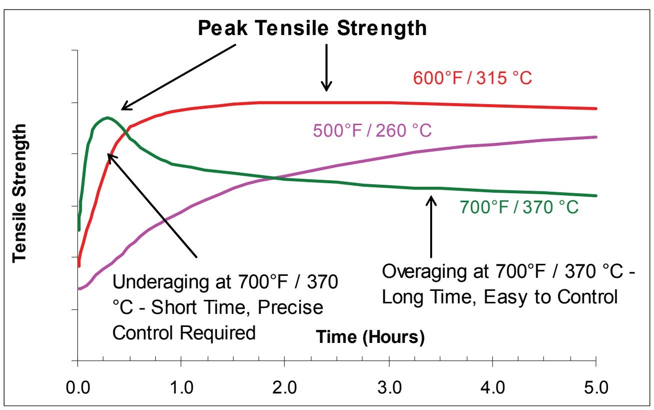

Figure 1. Alloy 25 – Response to Age Hardening Heat Treatment for three temperatures

Copper beryllium can be age hardened to varying degrees of strength. The term peak aged refers to copper beryllium aged to maximum strength. Alloys not aged to maximum strength are underaged, and alloys aged beyond maximum strength are overaged. Underaging copper beryllium increases toughness, uniform elongation, and fatigue strength. Overaging increases the alloy's electrical and thermal conductivity's and dimensional stability. Copper beryllium never ages at room temperature, even if material is stored for significant lengths of time.

Allowable variances in age hardening time are dependent on furnace temperature and final property requirements. To peak age at the standard temperature, furnace time is typically controlled to ±30 minutes. For high temperature aging, however, more precise time control is required to avoid overaging. For example, the aging time of Alloy 25 at 700°F (370°C) must be controlled to ±3 minutes to hold peak properties. Similarly, underaging requires tight control of the process variables because of the sharp initial increase of the aging response curve. In the standard age hardening cycle, heating and cooling rates are not critical.

However, to assure that aging time does not begin until parts reach temperature, a thermocouple can be placed on the parts to determine when desired temperature has been achieved.

Standard age hardening times and temperatures for the High Strength Copper Beryllium alloys and the High Conductivity Copper Beryllium alloys are detailed in the following sections.

HIGH STRENGTH WROUGHT COPPER BERYLLIUM (ALLOYS 25, M25, AND 165)

Age hardening temperatures for high strength wrought copper beryllium varies from 500°F (260°C) to 700°F (370°C). The time required to reach peak properties at the lower temperature is longer than at the higher temperature. The standard age hardening treatment is 600°F (315°C) for two to three hours; two hours for cold worked alloys and three hours for annealed alloys. Figure 2 shows the effect of time and temperature on the mechanical properties of Alloy 25 1/2H temper.

HIGH STRENGTH CAST BERYLLIUM COPPER ALLOYS (ALLOYS 275C, 20C, 21C, AND 165C)

The standard age hardening cycle for the high strength casting alloys, both annealed and as cast, is three hours at 625-650°F (320-340°C). However, to develop the highest strength for the as cast products, a separate solution anneal should precede the age hardening.

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HIGH CONDUCTIVITY WROUGHT ALLOYS (ALLOYS 3 AND 10) AND HIGH CONDUCTIVITY CAST ALLOY 3C

The standard age hardening cycle for both the wrought and cast high conductivity alloys is 900°F (480°C) for two to three hours; two hours for the cold rolled alloys and three hours for the cast and annealed wrought alloys. The high conductivity alloys are noted for their excellent electrical and thermal conductivity's. They obtain their moderate strength through age hardening, but at a higher temperature than the high strength alloys.

Because their mechanical properties change only slightly with time, few high conductivity applications benefit from either underaging or overaging. As an example, the heat treating curves for Alloy 3 demonstrate the affects of aging on the mechanical properties (see Figure 3).

AGE HARDENING EQUIPMENT

Recirculating Air Furnaces

Recirculating air furnaces, with temperature controlled to ±15°F (±10°C), are recommended for the standard age hardening of copper beryllium parts. These furnaces are designed to accommodate both large and small batches of parts, and are ideal for reels of stamped parts aged on carrier strips. However, care must be exercised when aging large batches of parts. Because of their sheer thermal mass, large batches of parts will not have all parts at temperature for the same length of time. As a result, underaging or short aging cycles of large batches of parts should be avoided.

Strand Aging Furnaces

Strand aging furnaces, using a protective atmosphere as the heating medium, are suitable for processing large quantities of material in coil form. This process is generally used by metal producers, and performed in long furnaces where material can be uncoiled into the furnace, passed through heating and cooling zones, and upcoiled upon exiting the furnace. The advantages of this type of furnace include good time and temperature control, better part to part uniformity and the ability to control special cycles for underaging or high temperature/short time aging and selectively hardening a portion of a part.

Salt Baths

Also recommended for age hardening wrought products are salt baths. Salt baths offer rapid and uniform heating, and are recommended at any temperature in the hardening range. They are particularly advantageous for short time, high temperature aging.

Vacuum Furnaces

Vacuum aging of copper beryllium parts can be done successfully, but caution must be exercised. Because vacuum furnace heating is by radiation only, it is difficult to uniformly heat large loads of parts. Parts on the outside of the load are subject to more direct radiation than those on the inside, as a result, the temperature gradient produces a variation in properties after heat treatment. To assure uniform heating, load size should be limited and parts must be shielded from the heating coils.

Alternatively, vacuum furnaces, backfilled with an inert gas such as argon or nitrogen, can be used. Again, parts must be shielded unless the furnace is equipped with a recirculating fan.

SURFACE OXIDE

During aging, the copper beryllium alloys develop a surface oxide composed of beryllium and, depending on the alloy and furnace atmosphere, copper oxides. These oxide films vary in thickness and composition and are often transparent.

Surface oxidation of beryllium during age hardening cannot be suppressed, even in a pure hydrogen atmosphere or a hard vacuum. However, some atmospheres can minimize the copper oxidation. For instance, a low dew point (-40°F/-40°C) atmosphere of approximately 5 percent hydrogen in nitrogen will minimize oxidation and economically aid in heat transfer. Air atmospheres contribute the most to surface oxide and reducing atmospheres the least.

Although oxide films are not detrimental to the base alloy, they should be removed if parts are to be plated, brazed, or soldered. For specific information on cleaning copper beryllium, consult the Materion Brush Performance Alloys TechBrief, "Cleaning Copper Beryllium".

SOLUTION ANNEALING

To elicit an effective age hardening response, copper beryllium must be solution annealed and quenched prior to aging. In addition to preparing the alloy for age hardening, annealing softens the alloy for further cold work and regulates grain size. Materion Brush Performance Alloys performs this required anneal on all wrought products at the mill. Therefore, customers usually do not need to anneal prior to age hardening. Furthermore, solution annealing will cause expansion and distortion of machined parts, and can cause generation of hazardous oxides on the surface.

If solution annealing is required, it is a high temperature soak: 1450°F (790°C) for the high strength alloys and 1650°F (900°C) for the high conductivity alloys. Annealing must be carefully controlled as excess time or temperature may cause grain growth. Solution annealing should be immediately followed by a water quench. As a precaution, large quantities of metal should not be annealed without first conducting a furnace simulation test. Thin sections, such as fine wire, require an annealing time of about 3-5 minutes. Fifteen minutes to one hour is required for thin walled tube and small castings. Heavy sections (above about one inch) usually require 1-3 hours. A heat up time of one hour per inch of thickness must be added to the soak time.

Because most salts will attack copper beryllium at temperatures in the solution annealing range, solution annealing should not be performed in a salt bath.

When peak aging copper beryllium castings and weldments, the customer must always solution anneal prior to age hardening. However, if peak properties are not required, castings can be age hardened from the as cast condition without the solution anneal.

MILL HARDENED ALLOYS

In applications not requiring severe forming, fabricators can eliminate the heat treating and cleaning of the heat treatable alloys by specifying mill hardened copper beryllium. Materion Brush Performance Alloys performs a special heat treatment on mill hardened product which delivers maximum formability at desired strength levels.

High Strength Mill Hardened Alloys

The high strength copper beryllium mill hardened alloys are Brush Alloy 190 and 290. Both alloys fall within the C17200 designation and are available in several tempers. Alloy 290 provides improved formability at a given strength level.

High Conductivity Mill Hardened Alloys

The high conductivity mill hardened copper beryllium alloys are Brush Alloys 3, 10, 174, Brush 60®, BrushForm® 47, 390®, and 390E. The mechanical properties of mill hardened Alloys 3 and 10 are equivalent to the peak aged properties of the AT or HT age hardenable tempers. High conductivity Alloys 174, Brush 60, BrushForm 47, 390 and 390E are available only in mill hardened tempers. Consult the “Guide to Materion Brush High Performance Alloys” for additional data on all mill hardened tempers.

SAFE HANDLING OF COPPER BERYLLIUM

Please refer to the Materion Corporation publications “Safety Facts 6 - Safety Practices for Heat Treating Copper Beryllium Parts”, and “Safety Facts 105 - Processing Copper Beryllium Alloys.”

Handling copper beryllium in solid form poses no special health risk. Like many industrial materials, beryllium-containing materials may pose a health risk if recommended safe handling practices are not followed. Inhalation of airborne beryllium may cause a serious lung disorder in susceptible individuals. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set mandatory limits on occupational respiratory exposures. Read and follow the guidance in the Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) before working with this material. For additional information on safe handling practices or technical data on copper beryllium, contact Materion Brush Performance Alloys, Technical Service Department at 1-800-375-4205.

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Alloy 25 ½ H

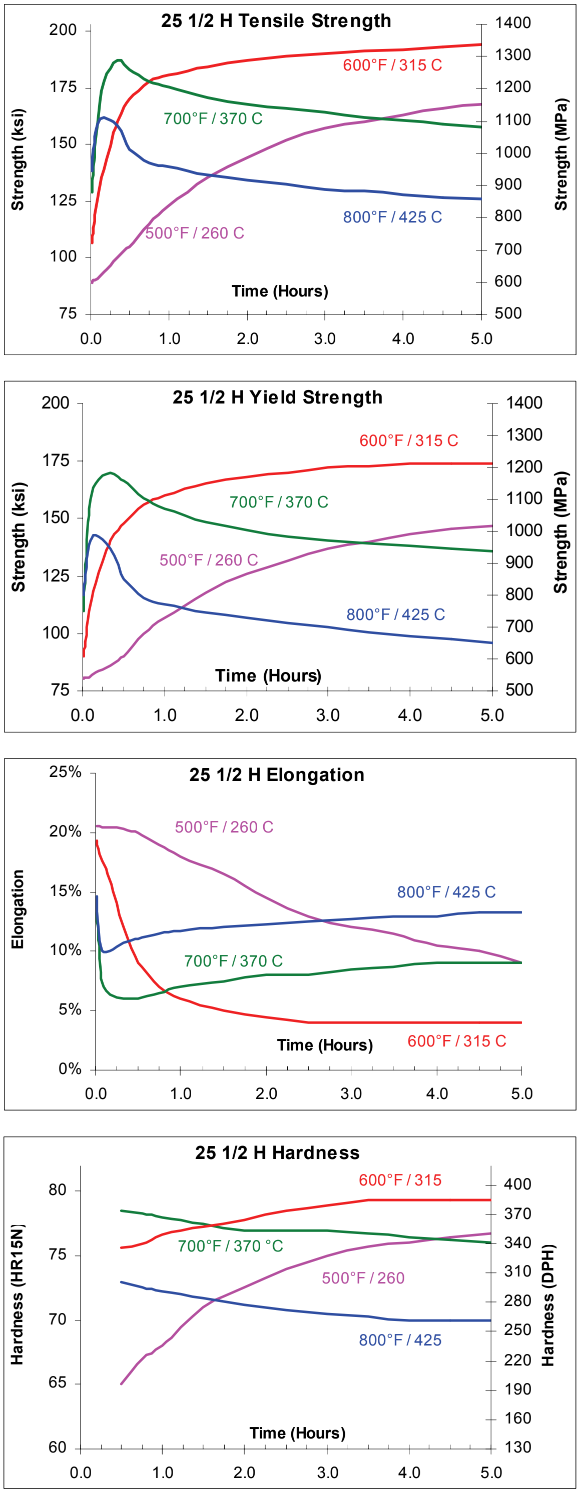

Figure 2. Alloy 25 ½ H Aging Response Curves

Alloys 3 A and 10 A

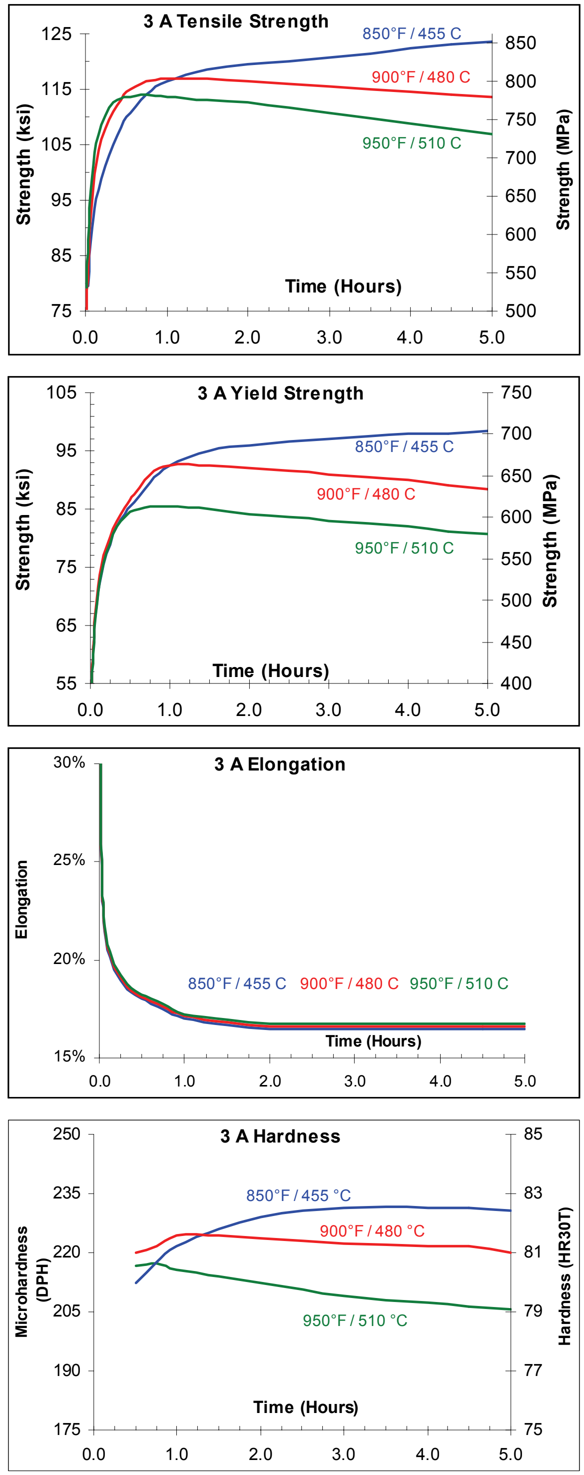

Figure 3. Alloys 3 A and 10 A Aging Response Curves

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