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Endorsed by American
Electroplaters' Society
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Standard Guide for Preparation of Zinc Alloy Die Castings for Electroplating and Conversion Coatings¹

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1. Scope

1.1 This guide is intended as an aid in establishing and maintaining a procedure for preparing zinc alloy die castings for electroplating and conversion coatings. It is primarily intended for the preparation of Alloys UNS Z33521 (AG-40A) and UNS Z35530 (AC-41A) (Specification B86) for electroplating with copper, nickel, and chromium (Specification B456).

1.2 *This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety and health practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.*

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards:*²

B6 Specification for Zinc

B86 Specification for Zinc and Zinc-Aluminum (ZA) Alloy Foundry and Die Castings

B456 Specification for Electrodeposited Coatings of Copper Plus Nickel Plus Chromium and Nickel Plus Chromium

2.2 *Military Standard:*

MIL-S-13165C Shot Peening of Metal Parts³

3. Summary of Practice

3.1 The normal sequence of preparation steps is as follows: (1) smoothing of parting lines; (2) smoothing of rough or defective surfaces, if necessary; (3) buffing, if necessary; (4) precleaning and rinsing; (5) alkaline electrocleaning and rinsing; (6) acid dipping and rinsing; and (7) copper striking.

¹ This guide is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee B08 on Metallic and Inorganic Coatings and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee B08.02 on Pre Treatment.

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² For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, www.astm.org, or contact ASTM Customer Service at service@astm.org. For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

³ Available from Standardization Documents Order Desk, Bldg. 4 Section D, 700 Robbins Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19111-5094, Attn: NPODS.

4. Significance and Use

4.1 The performance and quality of electroplated or conversion-coated zinc alloy die casting depends upon the surface cleanliness and condition. Various metals are electroplated or conversion coatings are established on zinc alloys for decorative or engineering finish. The common electroplates applied are usually copper, nickel, and chromium for decorative and functional uses. The common conversion coatings applied are phosphates, chromates, and anodized coatings. Electroplated zinc die castings and conversion coatings on zinc die castings are used in many industries such as the marine, automotive, plumbing fixtures, and appliance industries.

5. Composition and Characteristics of Zinc Alloy Die Castings

5.1 The alloys used in the manufacture of zinc alloy die castings are made with special high-grade zinc conforming to Specification B6, alloyed with about 4 % of aluminum, 0.04 % of magnesium, and either 0.25 (max) or 1.0 % copper (Alloys UNS Z33521 and UNS Z35530). Impurities such as lead, cadmium, tin, and iron are held at or below the specified low levels in Specification B86.

5.2 Die castings made of Alloys UNS 233521 and UNS 235530 are usually dense and fine grained but do not always have smooth surfaces. Defects sometimes encountered in the surface layers include cracks, crevices (cold shut), skin blisters, and hemispherical pores. Burrs are usually left at parting lines where fins and gates are removed by die trimming.

5.3 Cast surfaces are frequently contaminated with parting compounds applied at frequent intervals to die surfaces to facilitate the ejection of the castings and with water-soluble oils added to quenching tanks for corrosion inhibition.

5.4 Zinc alloy die castings are chemically active and are dissolved or etched during prolonged contact with concentrated solutions of many mineral or organic acids or strongly alkaline solutions with a pH greater than 10. Immersion periods in such solutions should be of short duration to avoid roughening.

6. Smoothing of Parting Lines

6.1 Parting lines are smoothed by (1) mechanical polishing with abrasive-coated wheels or belts, (2) tumbling with abrasive media, or (3) vibration with abrasives.

6.2 Abrasives with a size range of 220 to 300 mesh glued on cloth wheels or continuous cloth belts that run over flexible back-up wheels are usually used for mechanical polishing of parting lines. Wheel diameters range from 5 to 40 cm, depending on the complexity of the shape. Wheels are rotated with a minimum peripheral speed of 2500 m/min. A peripheral speed of 2100 m/min should not be exceeded with belts. Lower speeds of the order of 1100 to 1400 m/min are fairly common for small die castings polished on small diameter wheels. Abrasive belts should not be used dry but should be lubricated with a small amount of grease. Die castings usually are handled individually to polish parting lines smooth. This may require 30 s or less for small castings, and sometimes 5 or 6 min for larger ones.

6.3 Tumbling in horizontal barrels, loaded with abrasive stones such as limestone, preformed and fused aluminum oxide, ceramic shapes or abrasive-loaded plastic chips, and a lubricant such as soap or detergent solution, removes parting-line burrs from die castings in 4 to 12 h. The barrels may be rotated at 4 r/min. Higher speeds reduce the time cycles and costs, but also increase the danger of impingement of parts against zinc surfaces. A hexagonal barrel with a capacity of 0.5 m³ can be loaded with 450 kg of abrasive stones or chips and 90 kg of zinc die castings.

6.4 Vibration in a bed of resin-bonded abrasive chips removes parting-line burrs, typically in 1 to 4 h. Frequencies range from 700 to 2100 cpm and amplitudes from 0.8 to 6.4 mm. A vibrating tub with a capacity of 0.5 m³ can be loaded with about 900 kg of abrasive media and 180 kg of zinc die castings. A dilute solution of detergent or soap is continuously metered through the bed of media and parts to keep their surfaces clean and maximize surface smoothing. Parting lines may be mechanically polished before vibratory processing when a large amount of flash must be removed.

7. Smoothing of Rough or Defective Surfaces

7.1 Rough or defective surfaces are smoothed by (1) mechanical polishing on rotating wheels or continuous, abrasive-coated belts, (2) spin finishing, (3) vibratory finishing, or (4) controlled shot peening. Fissures, skin blisters, and other defects with a depth of 25 to 50 µm can usually be erased with these metal-removal methods. Deeper defects are infrequent.

7.2 Mechanical polishing for smoothing rough or defective surfaces is similar to mechanical polishing for smoothing parting line areas (see 6.2). Parting lines and rough or defective surfaces are frequently polished by the same operator. If polishing is mechanized to advance die castings attached to a conveyor through successive belts or wheels to polish different areas, a manual operation may be required later to complete the smoothing of parting lines if they are too curved. The finish ranges from 0.2 to 0.6 µm, depending on the abrasive and the pressure.

7.3 Smoothing by spinning in abrasives is accomplished by attaching die castings to spindles or drums rotated with a peripheral speed of about 600 m/min in a slurry of abrasive material such as ground corn cobs or nut shells mixed with a small amount of grease or other lubricant. Times usually range from 5 to 10 min and the finish from 0.1 to 0.2 µm, depending on the abrasive.

7.4 Vibrating tubs loaded with plastic chips (such as polyurethane) impregnated with an abrasive (such as aluminum oxide) smooth the surfaces of die castings in 2 to 4 h when frequencies are in the range of 1700 to 2100 cpm and amplitudes are adjusted to 3.2 to 6.4 mm. Vibratory machines produce a finish of 0.15 to 0.25 µm, with a cutting rate of 5 µm/h. A smoother finish of 0.075 to 0.125 µm can be obtained with plastic media containing finer abrasive, which removes metal at a slower rate. Media and zinc parts are usually loaded with a ratio of 5:1 or 6:1. Surface gouges may occur with a smaller ratio.

7.5 Controlled shot peening will plastically deform and densify the casting surface and near-surface layers. Shot peening can seal surface pores, which can create problems in electroplating and conversion coating. The process is described in MIL-S-13165C. The process is also effective in removing fins, burrs, and flash from the surface. The casting configuration, including the smallest size radii and wall thickness, as well as the required finish and contamination limits, will dictate the proper selection of peening media, shot size, intensity, and coverage, as is detailed in MIL-S-13165C.

8. Buffing

8.1 Die castings are buffed to produce a mirror-like finish, suitable for plating with conventional solutions, when good leveling plating solutions are not available. Buffing can be omitted, however, for die castings which have good surfaces or which can be uniformly polished to a finish of 0.25 µm, if solutions with good leveling power are used for plating copper and nickel.

8.2 Die castings are buffed on cloth wheels rotated at a peripheral speed not exceeding 2150 m/min. Slower speeds, of the order of 1100 to 1600 m/min, are used for small die castings. Buffing compounds should be made with a binder that is readily emulsified or saponified during alkaline cleaning. The abrasive may be tripoli (amorphous silica) or lime, mixed with about 25 % of tallow or other lubricants. Compounds suspended in a liquid are preferred for automatic buffing machines that advance die castings through a succession of buffs of varying diameter and width, which individually smooth different surface areas. Buffs are usually made of cloth with a thread count of 34 to 37/cm. A finish of 0.025 to 0.05 µm can be produced by buffing. The smoothing rate is influenced by the temperature of the metal surface (faster at approximately 150°C than at lower temperatures).

8.3 After buffing, surfaces with impacted buffing compound can be improved by passing them over a dry wheel to remove buffing compound. This will reduce the demand placed on the precleaning solution.

9. Precleaning and Rinsing

9.1 It is strongly recommended that the preliminary removal of most of the buffing compound and other soil in a precleaning operation be done as soon as possible after buffing and polishing. Most buffing compounds become substantially more difficult to remove after aging several days.

9.2 There are several methods by which soils can be removed from zinc die castings prior to final alkaline electrocleaning. Generally speaking, these fall into three main classes: