Isothermal aging of Al-Ni-Sc alloy containing Al₃Ni microfibers and Al₃Sc nanoprecipitates

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1. Introduction

Aluminum-Scandium (Al-Sc) alloys exhibit good mechanical properties at both room and elevated temperatures after being heat-treated to obtain a high number density of coherent Al₃Sc nanoprecipitates [1,2]. These precipitates have high thermal stability because of low diffusivity of Sc in Al [3] (D_{Sc/Al} = 2.0 \times 10^{-17} \text{m}^2/\text{s}). The precipitates resist coarsening up to 300°C which is much higher than other precipitates in commercial age-hardenable alloys, such as Mg₂Si and Al₃Cu which rapidly coarsen at 150-200°C due to high diffusivity of Mg and Cu in aluminum (D_{Mg/Al} = 1.1 \times 10^{-14} \text{m}^2/\text{s}, D_{Cu/Al} = 1.8 \times 10^{-15} \text{m}^2/\text{s}) [4-6].

Eutectic aluminum-nickel casting alloys (Al-6.1 wt% Ni) are promising for high-temperature applications because of the high chemical and thermal stabilities of eutectic Al₃Ni fibers that can resist coarsening up to 400 °C [7-9]. Theses fibers have micron-scale length and submicron diameter, even for standard solidification. The Al₃Ni interface with the aluminum appears to be coherent thus increasing resistance to coarsening at high-temperature [10]. Moreover, the Al-Ni alloys have good castability and low tendency to hot tear resulting from the high volume fraction (~10 vol.%) of Al₃Ni microfibers [8].

In a previous study [7], we found that Al₃Sc precipitates formed in Al-6Ni-0.4Sc alloy during aging provide improved mechanical properties at both room and elevated temperature as compared to Sc-free Al-6Ni. The objective of the present study is to identify the effect of Sc addition in Al-6Ni alloy on the microhardness evolution by comparing with binary Al-0.4Sc and Al-6Ni alloys. This is achieved through microstructure imaging, Vickers microhardness measurement, and local electrode atom probe tomography (LEAP) after isothermal aging at 300°C.

2. Experimental procedures

Each of the three alloys - Al-0.4Sc, Al-6Ni, and Al-6Ni-0.4Sc (all in wt%) - was melted in a silicon carbide crucible using an induction furnace, using 99.9 wt% pure Al, Al-2 wt% Sc and Al-20 wt% Ni master alloys. The melt was degassed by Ar gas, cleaned by flux and then poured into a thick-wall cylindrical copper mold (90 mm outer diameter, 30 mm inner diameter, 70 mm height). The average cooling rate was 10°C/s. The chemical compositions were analyzed by spark emission spectroscopy and are shown in Table 1 (Si content is also reported due to the contamination from the SiC crucible). The specimens were cut from the cast ingot as quarter discs (15 mm in radius and 1.25 mm in thickness.) For microstructure analysis, the specimens were prepared by standard metallographic methods (polishing down to 1 μm diamond suspension) and imaged by field emission electron microscope (Hitachi SU8030 FE-SEM). The precipitate evolution was studied through isothermal aging in a muffle furnace in air at 300°C terminated by water quenching to room temperature.

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The aged specimens were polished by standard metallographic methods (down to 1 μm diamond suspension) and subjected to Vickers microhardness tests (Struers Duramin 5 hardness tester) at least five times for each condition. Peak-aged Al-6Ni-0.4Sc was selected for study of the precipitates by LEAP. The specimen was shaped into a tip by focused-ion beam (FIB) with an in-situ lift out technique. A LEAP 4000X Si-X tomograph (Cameca, Madison, WI) [11,12] was used with a picosecond pulsed ultraviolet (wave length: 355 nm) laser at a pulse repetition rate of 500 kHz, a pulse energy of 30-50 pJ, and a tip temperature of 30 K. The three-dimensional tomographic data were analyzed by Cameca’s integrated visualization and analysis software (IVAS).

Table 1. Alloy chemical compositions as determined by spark emission spectrometry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nominal composition, wt%</th>
<th>Experimental composition, wt% (at%)</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ni</td>
<td>Sc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-0.4Sc</td>
<td>0* (0*)</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-6Ni</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.83)</td>
<td>(0***)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-6Ni-0.4Sc</td>
<td>6.04</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.88)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* below detection limit of 100 wt. ppm
** below detection limit of 6 wt. ppm

Figure 1. SEM micrographs of as-cast specimens: (a) Al-0.4Sc, showing no sign of primary Al3Sc phase, (b) Al-6Ni with Al3Ni eutectic microfibers embedded in aluminum matrix and no primary Al3Sc, and (c) Al-6Ni-0.4Sc, with similar structure as Al-6Ni.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 As-cast microstructure

The as-cast microstructures of the Al-0.4Sc, Al-6Ni, and Al-6Ni-0.4Sc alloys are shown in Figure 1(a), (b), and (c), respectively. For the Al-0.4Sc alloy (Figure 1(a)), the Sc content exceeded maximum solubility limit (~0.38 wt% at equilibrium). However, there is no sign of primary Al3Sc. This is due to the high cooling rate of the copper mold, which maintains all Sc as super saturated solid solution. Thus, all available Sc can form Al3Sc nanoprecipitates upon subsequent aging. The microstructure of the Al-6Ni (Figure 1(b)) and Al-6Ni-0.4Sc (Figure 1(c)) alloys are similar: Al3Ni microfibers (bright contrast as arrowed in Figure 2 (b,c)) are embedded within the aluminum matrix (dark contrast as arrowed in Figure 1 (b,c)), Coarser Al3Ni lamellae are found at the edge of the dendritic colonies [13]. Moreover, no other phases were found in Al-6Ni-0.4Sc (e.g., primary Al3Sc particles). It can be seen that the addition of Sc into Al-6Ni does not significantly change the morphology of Al3Ni microfibers, unlike in Al-Si alloys in which Sc can modify the plate-like eutectic Si to fine fibrous morphology [14].

3.2 Ambient-temperature hardness

Figure 2 shows Vickers microhardness evolution during isothermal aging at 300°C up to 672 h (~1 month). For Al-6Ni, the hardness remains constant throughout the experiment confirming the high thermal stability of Al3Ni microfibers, which are known to resist coarsening up to 400°C [13,15]. For Al-0.4Sc, in the as-cast stage, the hardness is higher than that of pure Al (~200 MPa [16]), which is consistent with Al3Sc nano-precipitation occurring on cooling after solidification. For Al-6Ni-0.4Sc, the hardness is significantly higher than for Al-0.4Sc in the as-cast stage, as expected from the strengthening of Al3Ni microfibers. The evolutions of microhardness of Al-6Ni-0.4Sc and Al-0.4Sc are similar and can be divided into four stages: (1) incubation, where the hardness remains unchanged from the as-cast stage (~0.5 h, probably ~0.1 h), (2) under-aging, where the hardness increases rapidly (~0.1 to ~3 h), (3) peak-aging, where the hardness reaches a plateau (~3 to 144 h), and (4) over-aging, where hardness slowly decreases (>144 h). The Al3Sc precipitation kinetics (i.e., onset and duration of stages) during isothermal aging at 300°C appears to be unaffected by Ni additions. However, the hardness of Al-6Ni-0.4Sc is significantly higher than that of Al-0.4Sc, by ~300-400 MPa. The overall strength increment τ is can be explained through superposition of two strengthening effects, from Al3Ni microfibers and from Al3Sc nanoprecipitates, as described by the empirical equation [17,18]:

\[ \tau = \left( \sum_i \left( \frac{\tau_i}{k} \right)^k \right)^{1/k} \]  

where \( \tau_i \) is the strength increment for a particular mechanism and the exponent \( k \) is between 1 (linear sum) and 2 (Pythagorean sum). This exponent was calculated by using increment in hardness (as compared to pure Al, 200 MPa). A good fit for Al-6Ni-0.4Sc is achieved with \( k = 1.39 \) (shown as a dashed-line in Figure 2). The \( k \) value is very close to \( k = 1.3 \) reported in Al-Sc-Zr alloys where Al3(Sc,Zr) nanoprecipitates coexist with Al2O3 submicron particles [19].
Table 2 Average compositions of Al$_3$Sc precipitate, matrix, and tip (at.%) for peak-aged Al-6Ni-0.4Sc (wt%), as determined by LEAP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composition (at.%)</th>
<th>Ni</th>
<th>Sc</th>
<th>Si</th>
<th>Al</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>matrix</td>
<td>0.020 ± 0.0003</td>
<td>0.008 ± 0.0002</td>
<td>0.018 ± 0.0003</td>
<td>99.953 ± 0.0004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tip</td>
<td>0.020 ± 0.0002</td>
<td>0.236 ± 0.0009</td>
<td>0.039 ± 0.0004</td>
<td>99.705 ± 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>precipitate</td>
<td>0.036 ± 0.0005</td>
<td>25.594 ± 0.121</td>
<td>2.002 ± 0.0388</td>
<td>72.368 ± 0.124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 Evolution during isothermal aging of Al-0.4Sc, Al-6Ni, and Al-6Ni-0.4Sc. The dashed line curve for Al-6Ni-0.4Sc was calculated from Eq. (1) with k = 1.39 [20].

3.3 Local electrode atom probe tomography (LEAP)

The Al-6Ni-0.4Sc alloy at peak-aging (300°C, 24 h) was investigated by LEAP. The 3D LEAP reconstruction is shown in Figure 3. The tip contains part of an Al$_3$Ni microfiber shown in the lower corner of the tip and numerous Al$_3$Sc precipitates visibly enriched with Si (present as clusters collocated with the Al$_3$Sc precipitates). However, there is no Ni cluster in the tip. The exact composition of the nanoprecipitates as measured by LEAP is calculated and reported in Table 2. Negligible Ni amounts (0.04 at.%) and substantial Si amounts (2 at.%) are present in the Al$_3$Sc nanoprecipitates. Thus, Ni not locked in the Al$_3$Ni microfibers partitions somewhat to the Al$_3$Sc precipitates, whose Ni content is twice that of the very low concentration found in the matrix. The low Ni amount present in the precipitates is consistent with the isothermal aging results showing that hardness is unaffected by Ni additions to the alloy. Silicon is known to accelerate Al$_3$Sc precipitation and can also increase the number density of precipitates. This also increases the thermodynamic driving force of Al$_3$Sc nanoprecipitates which can increase the precipitation kinetics. Moreover, Si also forms clusters acting as heterogeneous nucleation of the Al$_3$Sc precipitates, resulting in an increased nanoprecipitates number density [21-24]. However, in this study, the Si content in the Al-6Ni-0.4Sc alloy (~0.10 wt% Si) does not significantly differ from that in the Al-0.4Sc alloy (~0.12 wt% Si); therefore, the effects of Si on hardness increments and precipitation of Al$_3$Sc precipitates can be assumed to be the same in both alloys.

Figure 3. Atom-probe tomographic reconstruction of Al-6Ni-0.4Sc in the peak-aged condition (300°C/24 h). The tip contains part of an Al$_3$Ni microfiber shown in the lower left corner of the tip and numerous Al$_3$Sc nano-precipitates showing small amount of Si in their cores: Al atoms are shown in blue, Sc in red, Si in black, and Ni in green.

4. Conclusions

This study examines the effects of Sc addition in Al-6Ni alloy upon Al$_3$Sc precipitate evolution, with key results as follows:

1. The binary eutectic Al-6Ni alloy, which contains Al$_3$Ni microfibers, maintains its hardness up to 672 h upon aging at 300°C.
2. Sc addition (0.4 wt%) to Al-6Ni does not change the morphology of the Al$_3$Ni microfiber.
3. Ternary Al-6Ni-0.4Sc exhibits peak-aging at 300°C after 4 h, followed by over-aging after 144 h, due to Al$_3$Sc precipitation.
4. This hardness evolution at 300°C is similar to that of binary Al-Sc, indicating that Al$_3$Ni microfibers do not affect the evolution of the Al$_3$Sc precipitates, consistent with the very low Ni concentration (0.04 at.%) found in the Al$_3$Sc precipitates.
5. The hardness curve of Al-6Ni-0.4Sc at 300°C can be described via a superposition of the curves of Al-0.4Sc and Al-6Ni alloys, over the full aging time of 0-672 h, with a single best-fit exponent k = 1.39.

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