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# Quality and wear behavior of graded polycrystalline diamond compact cutters

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## A B S T R A C T

The wear behavior of conventional and graded polycrystalline diamond compact cutters was studied using a vertical lathe with mortar counterfaces. Different cutters were considered regarding to their diamond grain size and the high pressure and the high temperature conditions of the manufacturing process (HPHT). On the base of these cutters, a cobalt gradation process was performed on the WC-Co substrates by reactive imbibition. A quality factor developed in previous studies was calculated to evaluate cutters wear performances. The results showed that a controlled HPHT process can act on the wear resistance certainly by improving the diamond grain boundary cohesion. Unexpectedly, the diamond granulometry appeared to be a secondary factor influencing the wear resistance. The reactive imbibition clearly increased the wear resistance, even for cutters with coarse diamond grains (i.e. potentially impact resistant). Finally, a third body approach describes that the quartz particles detached from the mortar rock realizes abrasive scratches on the cutters wear flat. When the wear flat reaches the substrate, the formation of voids in the contact, associated with the trapping of abrasive particles, rises the wear kinetic. As a secondary mechanism, Raman spectroscopy measurements highlighted tribological transformed structures by the formation of graphite and amorphous carbon on the diamond worn surfaces.

### Keywords:

Diamond

Tungsten carbide-cobalt

Reactive imbibition

Wear testing

Third body

Graphite

## 1. Introduction

Two main families of tools are employed in the drilling industry: roller cone with WC-Co inserts and polycrystalline diamond compact (PDC) bits formed by PDC/WC-Co cutters. First studies showed that the PDC bits should be used at lower load than the roller cone bits [1]. That is why the PDC bits operate in soft rock to medium hard formations essentially by shear mode. In harder fields, roller cone bits are rather used in performing impact excavations. Nevertheless, the drag bits could drill twice faster and longer than roller bits even in hard formations [2]. Accordingly, the market share of PDC cutters toward roller cone inserts reached 50% in 2002 and is estimated at 80% in 2020 [3].

The earth's crust is composed by 80% of hard and potentially abrasive material (e.g. alumina, silica, hematite). This explains that the PDC bits suffer mainly from abrasive wear [4]. The abrasive wear is described in the literature by microcuttings of diamond grains by abrasive grains coming from the rock in the contact [5]. At the PDC microstructure level, the wear mechanisms are exposed as intergranular and

transgranular cracks and cobalt phase depletion leading to diamond grain pullouts [6].

In severe conditions (e.g. in hard rocks with high applied load), the PDC bits are also subjects to impact damages and thermal wear. When the temperature is over 600 °C in the air, the thermal wear is produced by oxidation (i.e. combustion) [7]. However, during excavation experiments, Glowka [8] showed that the wear rate of PDC cutters increases when the contact temperature reaches 350 °C. This author assumed that this phenomenon is associated to the graphitization or the amorphization of the metastable PDC microstructure. These physico-chemical transformations of the contact surfaces are also called tribological transformed structures (TTS) [9] and are induced by mechanical and/or thermal condition in the contact.

In practice, one recurrent aim of the manufacturers is to improve the PDC cutters wear resistance without affecting their ability to undergo repetitive impacts in harder formations. In this way, gradation processes were developed to increase the impact resistance of the cutters body without affecting the abrasive resistance of the active surface in contact with the rock. This study focuses on PDC cutters made by the imbibition process first introduced by Lisovsky [10]. As presented by Lefort-Sorlier et al. [11], this process consists on a gradual enrichment of cobalt in the WC-Co substrate. These authors associated to the imbibition process a boron nitride reactive coating on the substrates forming

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borides WCoB at the PDC/WC-Co interface [12,13]. The borides formation should enhance the PDC mechanical resistance.

Actually, few studies focused on the wear resistance of innovative graded PDC cutters. In previous studies, a quality factor  $Q$  was developed to better characterize the wear resistance of PDC cutters [14]. After wear experiments, this factor considers not only the wear rate of PDC cutters but also the cutting efficiency of these cutters. In other words, this factor gives information of wear resistance with regards to the forces applied on it during experiments (i.e. friction and cutting forces). The aim of this work is then to evaluate the quality of cutters treated by reactive imbibition and to suggest wear mechanisms associated to the quality results.

### Nomenclature

$\alpha$	Back rake angle, deg;
$\Delta H_{WC}$	Hardness range, HV 2 kg/10 s;
$\varepsilon$	Intrinsic specific energy, $J \cdot m^{-3}$ ;
$\eta$	Cutting efficiency;
$\mu$	Friction coefficient;
$D_{PDC}$	Mean diamond grain size, m;
$D_{WC}$	Mean WC grain size, m;
$A_c$	Cross-sectional area of cut, $m^2$ ;
$A_f$	Wear flat area, $m^2$ ;
$F_N$	Total normal force, N;
$F_N^f$	Normal friction force component, N;
$F_T$	Total drag force, N;
$F_T^0$	Initial transverse force, N;
$H_{WC}$	Substrate mean hardness, HV 2 kg/10 s;
$k$	Wear rate, $m^3 \cdot N^{-1} \cdot m^{-1}$ ;
$L$	Excavation distance, m;
$L_T$	Total excavation distance, m;
$p_{Co}^{PDC}$	PDC cobalt content, wt.%;
$p_{Co}^{WC}$	Substrate cobalt content, wt.%;
$Q$	Quality factor;
$Q_i$	Internal flow, $m^3 \cdot s^{-1}$ ;
$Q_r$	Recycling flow, $m^3 \cdot s^{-1}$ ;
$Q_s$	Source flow, $m^3 \cdot s^{-1}$ ;
$Q_w$	Wear flow, $m^3 \cdot s^{-1}$ ;
$R_a$	Arithmetic average roughness, m;
$t$	Excavation time, s;
$u$	Cutting capacity, m;
$V_C$	Cutter worn volume, $m^3$ ;

## 2. PDC cutters properties

### 2.1. Conventional cutters

The studied cutters have a cylindrical geometry with a diameter of 13.4 mm and a height of 10 mm. They are formed by a tungsten carbide-cobalt substrate surmounted by a PDC part of 2 mm in

thickness. Manufacturers usually select a specific interface design between the diamond part and the WC-Co one. An optimized interface design, more complex than a flat design, can efficiently distribute the residual stresses produced after manufacturing between the two materials [14]. For this study, PDC cutters were selected with a same interface design.

The conventional cutters are manufactured from a sintered WC-Co substrate (Fig. 1). A diamond powder is first put on the substrate and is then sintered with it under high pressure and high temperature (i.e. HPHT process) over 1400 °C and 5.5 GPa. During this step, the diamond grains form a dense skeleton and the liquid cobalt infiltrates this microstructure from the substrate. The amount of cobalt displaced in the PDC part is homogeneous and is function of the diamond grains size [15]. Finally, a surface finishing is performed and a chamfer is realized on the PDC part.

As well known by the manufacturers, PDC cutters with a fine grain distribution are more resistant to abrasion than cutter with coarse grains [3]. Inversely, a coarse diamond microstructure produces cutters more impact resistant than with fine grains. In this way, two different references of cutters were selected: F cutters with a fine distribution of diamond grains and C cutters with coarse diamond grains. These cutters were also associated to two different conditions of high pressure and high temperature process (HPHT): HPHT1 and HPHT2. The HPHT2 cycle was set at a higher sintering pressure with a shorter dwell time than the HPHT1 cycle. The HPHT1 and HPHT2 cycles were respectively performed on cutters referenced with an index 1 (F1 and C1 cutters) and an index 2 (F2 and C2 cutters). The diamond grains were observed by fractures in the PDC part realized by impact tests. The SEM fractographies of the cleft surfaces reveals a mean grains size of  $6 \pm 1 \mu m$  for the F cutters (Fig. 2a) and  $17 \pm 4 \mu m$  for the C cutters (Fig. 2b).

The WC-Co substrates are quite similar for all the conventional cutters with a mean cobalt content of  $11.4 \pm 0.1$  wt.%, a mean WC grain size of  $1.7 \pm 0.4 \mu m$  and a mean hardness of  $1359 \pm 9$  HV 2 kg/10 s (Fig. 3 and Table 1).

The infiltration of cobalt into the PDC part during the HPHT process produces a gradual cobalt content in the substrate and a local depletion of cobalt near the WC-Co/PDC interface. This depletion of cobalt implies a greater hardness toward the interface. Ther et al. [16] showed that the cycle HPHT2 induces a greater hardness of the substrate near the interface than with the HPHT1. This is here well displayed by the difference of hardness ranges in the substrates which is about 38% between the cutters treated by HPHT1 and HPHT2.

The increase of hardness in the substrates near the interface can improve the cutter flank wear resistance which is not studied here (e.g. erosion wear by the drilling mud). In addition, the HPHT2 cycle, through its higher sintering pressure, should also enhance the bonding between the diamond grains and then increase the mechanical properties of the PDC part.

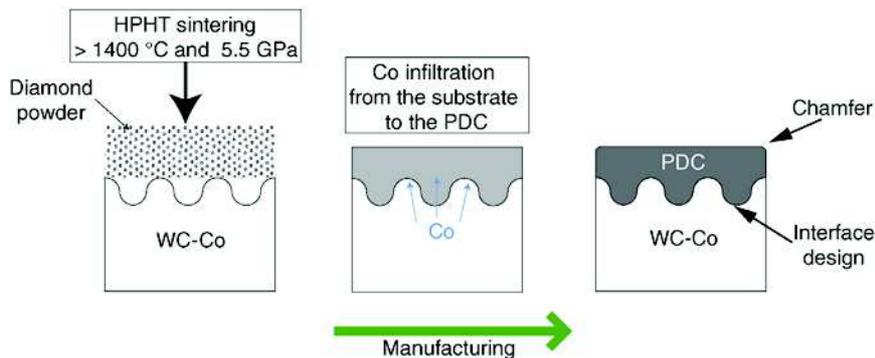


Fig. 1. Manufacturing processes of conventional PDC cutters.

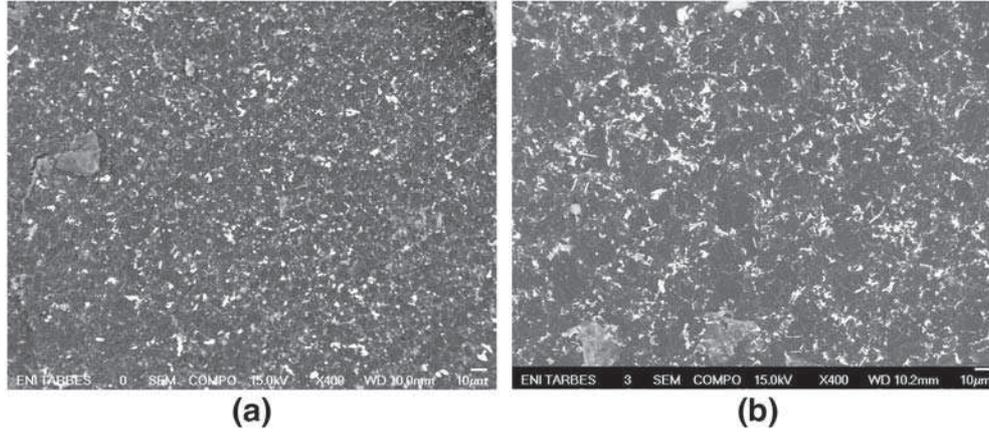


Fig. 2. SEM fractographies of the PDC part: a – F cutter; b – C cutter.

## 2.2. Graded cutters

Comparing to the conventional cutters, the manufacturing of the graded cutters has two additional steps defining the reactive imbibition process (Fig. 4). The BN coating is put on the sintered WC-Co substrate surface. In addition, an imbibition material rich in cobalt at 65 wt.% (Co65), is also placed under the sintered substrate. The BN coating reacts with the cemented carbide material and forms finely dispersed boride phases in the substrate near its surface [17]. The cobalt from the Co65 material migrates into the substrate and creates a graduation of cobalt in the WC-Co part with a core rich in cobalt. The graded cutters were also submitted to the two different conditions of sintering HPHT1 and HPHT2. Therefore, there are four references of graded cutters based on the conventional F and C cutters: F-G1, F-G2, C-G1 and C-G2.

Except the graduation of cobalt, the WC-Co substrate and the PDC part microstructures are based on the conventional cutters. The diamond and WC grain sizes are similar between the conventional and the graded cutters. The imbibition process clearly acted on the cobalt and the hardness distribution in the graded substrate. The mean cobalt content is  $13.2 \pm 0.3$  wt.% which is 16% greater than the non-graded substrates (Table 2). The discrepancy of the cobalt content is also greater for the graded cutters. The mean hardness is  $1265 \pm 12$  HV 2 kg/10 s which is 7% lower than the non-graded substrates. The hardness ranges are obviously greater than for the associated conventional substrates with a difference of 36% for the F-G1 and F-G2 cutters, 21% for the C-G1 and 44% for the C-G2.

The increase of cobalt in the substrates core improves the toughness of the cutters. The borides form in the substrates near the PDC/WC-Co interface should also improve the wear resistance of this part. As the

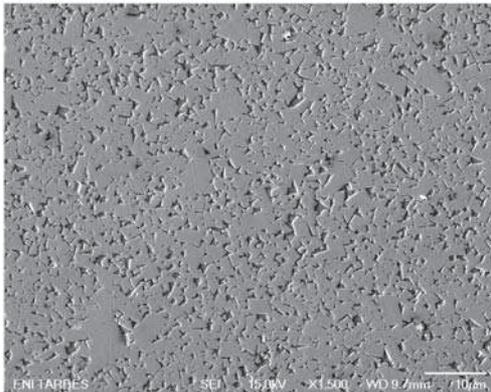


Fig. 3. SEM micrograph of a WC-Co substrate.

infiltration strongly depends on the diamond grain size, the PDC part cobalt content is not influenced by the imbibition process. However, the borides should reduce the residual stresses in traction in the PDC by reducing the difference between the thermal expansion of the WC-Co substrate and the PDC part.

## 3. Experimental procedure

### 3.1. Wear experiments

A vertical lathe-type device was used to simulate drilling conditions. Cutters brazed on sample holders were adjusted downward on the lathe shaft. The counterfaces were made of a manufactured mortar rock (1 m in external diameter, 0.5 m in internal diameter and 0.6 m thick). These mortars have homogeneous physicochemical and mechanical properties (Table 3). The high quartz content of the mortar gives its abrasive characteristic.

The experiments were carried out according to the following drilling conditions: normal load  $F_N$  ranged from 3000 to 5000 N, back rake angle  $\alpha$  at  $15^\circ$ , penetration depth of 2 mm and mean cutting speed of  $1.8 \text{ m s}^{-1}$  (Fig. 5).

The tests were conducted in atmospheric environment and no lubricant was added into the contact in order to significantly wear the PDC cutters. During experiments, a wear flat area  $A_f$  is formed at the tip of the cutter. The height of material lost  $h$  was measured to calculate the cutting active area  $A_c$  and the cutter worn volume  $V_c$ .

### 3.2. Cutters quality assessment

The assessment of cutters quality is made by the calculus of the quality factor  $Q$  (Eq. (1)) [14].

$$Q = \frac{\mu}{\varepsilon} \frac{u}{L_T k} \quad (1)$$

Table 1

Physicochemical properties of conventional cutters (with the diamond grain size  $D_{PDC}$ , the WC grain size  $D_{WC}$ , the substrate cobalt content  $p_{Co}^{WC}$ , the substrate mean hardness  $H_{WC}$  and the substrate hardness ranges  $\Delta H_{WC}$ ).

Cutter reference	$D_{PDC}$ ( $\mu\text{m}$ )	$D_{WC}$	$p_{Co}^{WC}$ (wt.%)	$H_{WC}$ (HV 2 kg/10 s)	$\Delta H_{WC}$
F1	$6 \pm 1$	$1.7 \pm 0.4$	$11.5 \pm 0.6$	$1349 \pm 34$	175
F2			$11.4 \pm 0.9$	$1357 \pm 51$	244
C1	$17 \pm 4$		$11.4 \pm 0.6$	$1359 \pm 33$	182
C2			$11.2 \pm 0.7$	$1370 \pm 46$	250

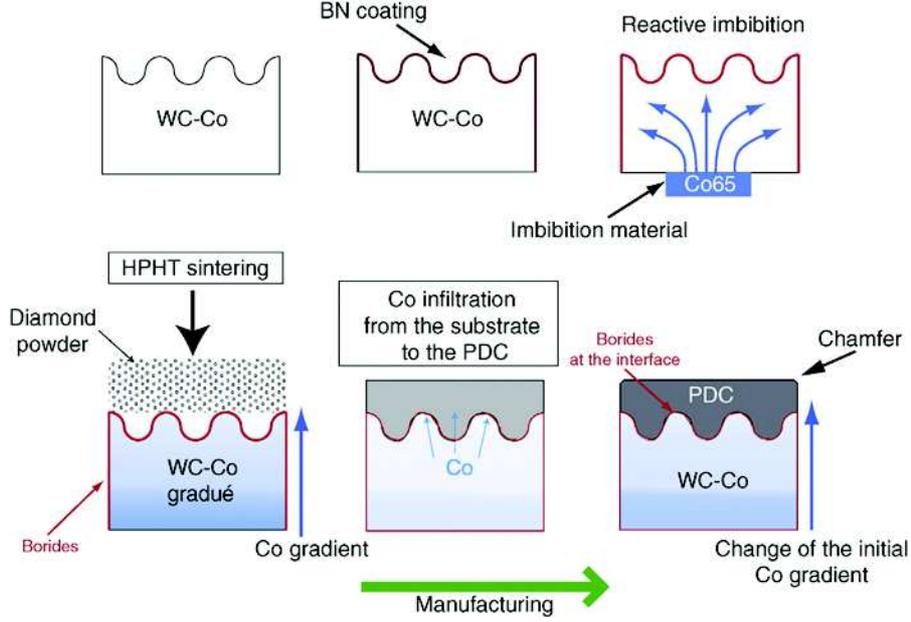


Fig. 4. Manufacturing processes of graded PDC cutters by reactive imbibition (after Ther et al. [16]).

The variables  $\mu$  and  $\varepsilon$  are respectively the friction coefficient and the intrinsic specific energy calculated with the Detournay–Defournay model (Eq. (2)) [18]. The total excavation distance  $L_T$  was set at 8500 m. The variables  $F_T(t)$  and  $F_N(t)$  represent the overall excavation forces applied on the cutter at the time  $t$ . The constant  $A$  is a function of the parameters  $\mu$ ,  $\varepsilon$  and  $A_c$ .

$$\begin{cases} F_T(t) = \mu F_N(t) + A \\ \frac{F_T(0)}{A_c} = \varepsilon \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

The parameter  $k$  is the wear rate which has to be determined through an Archard model (Eq. (1)). The force  $F_N^f$  is the normal component of friction forces applied on the wear flat  $A_f$  and  $L$  is the cutting distance.

$$V_c = k \cdot F_N^f \cdot L. \quad (3)$$

The parameter  $u$  is the cutting capacity which is extracted from the calculus and the exponential fitting of the cutting efficiency  $\eta$  (Eq. (4)).

$$\eta = \frac{F_T(0)}{F_T(t)} = \exp\left(-\frac{1}{u} \cdot L\right). \quad (4)$$

Finally, the dimensionless quality factor  $Q$  balances the cutter wear resistance and the cutting capacity. Thus, the lower is the wear rate and the greater is the cutting capacity, the better is the cutter quality. In this way, this model not only considers the cutters wear kinetic but also the mechanical interactions (i.e. friction and cutting) between the cutter and the rock. The quality factor gathers the information of the

cutter wear volume and the mechanical energy spent in the contact to create this wear volume and the excavated rock volume.

#### 4. Wear results

The final worn height  $h_f$  measured after an excavation distance of 8500 m gives first results on the cutter performances (Fig. 6). This distance of 8500 m is the highest excavation distance in common for all the studied cutters. After this distance, some cutters were excessively worn and the performance comparison is then impossible. Again, the worn height results do not consider the forces applied on the cutters during the experiments. However, it is interesting to already note that the graded cutters have a lower final worn height than the associated conventional cutters. Also, the HPHT2 process clearly leads to lower worn heights.

During the wear tests, four cutters (C1, C2, F1 and F-G1) were worn with a wear flat formed over the PDC part in the WC-Co substrate. The four others cutters (F2, C-G1, C-G2 and F-G2) were only worn in their diamond part. The wear kinetic clearly increases when the wear flat spreads in the WC-Co substrate. This increase is displayed by a slope change in the Archard representation (i.e.  $V$  vs.  $F_N^f \cdot L$ ) (Fig. 7). Finally, only a final excavation distance  $L_T$  of 8500 m is considered in the calculus which limit the effect of this change of kinetic in the assessment of quality.

The quality factor results shows that the graded cutter have a greater wear resistance than the associated conventional cutters (Fig. 8). Furthermore, all graded cutters have a higher quality factor than any conventional cutter. The results are well discriminated. The HPHT2 treatment clearly creates the cutters with the highest performances.

Considering the same conditions of HPHT, the C conventional or graded cutters have a greater wear resistance than the F cutters. This

Table 2  
Physicochemical properties of graded cutters.

Cutter reference	$D_{PDC}$ ( $\mu\text{m}$ )	$D_{WC}$	$p_{Co}^{WC}$ (wt.%)	$H_{WC}$ (HV 2 kg/10 s)	$\Delta H_{WC}$
F-G1	$6 \pm 1$		$12.9 \pm 1.3$	$1279 \pm 59$	238
F-G2		$1.7 \pm 0.4$	$13.6 \pm 1.7$	$1249 \pm 73$	333
C-G1	$17 \pm 4$		$13.0 \pm 1.1$	$1274 \pm 49$	220
C-G2			$13.4 \pm 2.3$	$1257 \pm 100$	359

Table 3  
Mortar physicochemical and mechanical properties.

Density ( $\text{kg m}^{-3}$ )	Quartz content (wt.%)	Young modulus (GPa)	Compressive strength (MPa)
2150	60	78	48

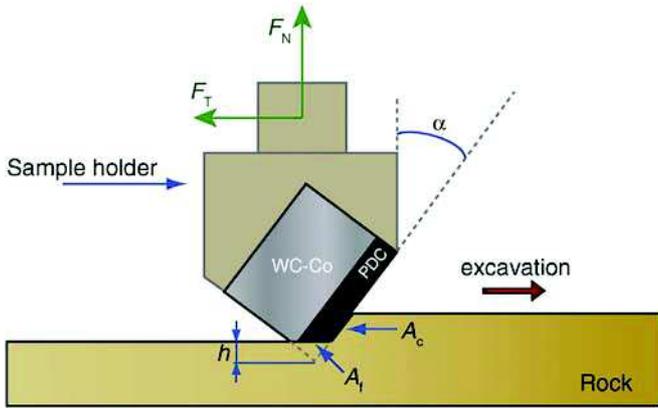


Fig. 5. Cutter/rock contact configuration of the vertical lathe with  $F_N$  and  $F_T$  the applied forces,  $\alpha$  the back rake angle,  $A_c$  the cutting active area and  $A_f$  the wear flat area.

result is unexpected as the cutters with finer diamond grain distribution usually have a higher wear resistance. Finally, the best cutter is the C-G2 graded with a coarse diamond microstructure and manufactured under the cycle HPHT2.

## 5. Worn surfaces analyzes

### 5.1. Observations

The diamond microstructure is not observable on the wear flats and only macroscopic wear mechanisms are visible in the PDC part. For all the cutters, when the wear flat is only in the diamond part, a relatively smooth worn surface is observed (Fig. 9a). When the wear flat reaches the WC-Co part, abrasive scratches are displayed along the excavation direction (Fig. 9b). In this case, white debris, mainly formed of rock particles, is accumulated at the interface PDC/WC-Co.

SEM observations of the wear flat in WC-Co part highlights a depletion of the cobalt matrix revealing the prismatic form of the WC grains (Fig. 10). Transfers of rock particles are included in the WC-Co microstructure.

### 5.2. Profilometry measurements

Topographies of the wear flats were performed with an optical profilometer (Wyko NT1000). These topographies display the abrasion scratches in the PDC part and in the WC-Co part when the wear flat is also in the substrate (Fig. 11). More particularly, the worn cutters show the formation of voids in the cemented carbide near the interface. These voids can explain the accumulation of debris on the wear flat previously observed.

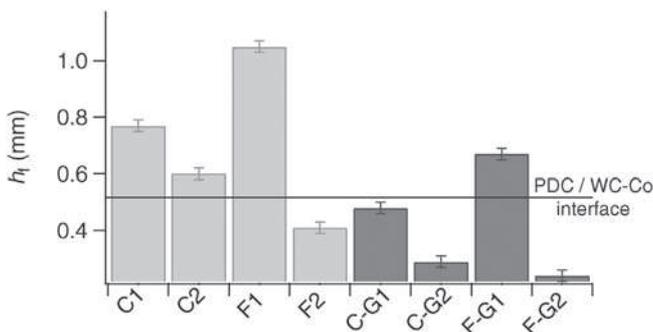


Fig. 6. Final worn height  $h_f$  of conventional and graded cutters ( $L_T = 8500$  m).

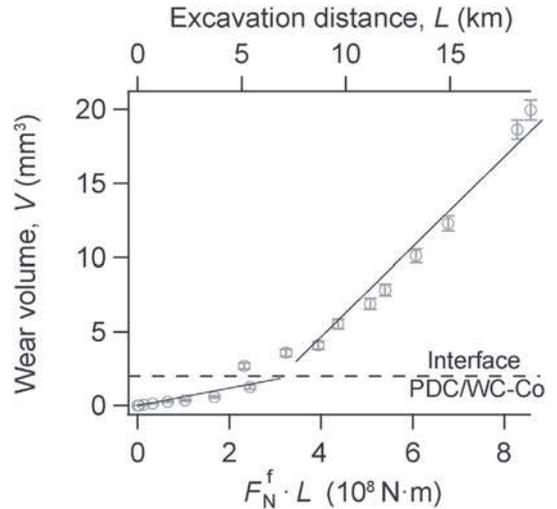


Fig. 7. Wear kinetic of the cutter C-G1 worn over its interface PDC/WC-Co ( $L_T = 19720$  m): wear volume vs. the product  $F_N^f \cdot L$  and the excavation distance  $L$ .

The roughness was evaluated by the profile arithmetic average  $R_a$  on the cutter of the cycle HPHT2 (Table 4). These measures were done in the PDC part on F2, F-G2, C2 and C-G2 cutters worn across the PDC/WC-Co interface. The roughness values indicate that the cutters C with a coarse granulometry may produce deeper scratches than cutters F. Moreover, the graded cutters have lower roughness values than the conventional cutters. This implies that the graduation process act on the PDC microstructure and its mechanical properties.

### 5.3. Chemical analyzes

Raman analyzes were carried out in the PDC part of an unworn cutter C1 and in the PDC part of a worn cutter C1 in the wear flat. Before the Raman measurements, the PDC worn surface was cleaned to limit the detection of rock particles. These analyzes were performed with a Raman confocal spectrometer (Horoba Labram HR 800). This device uses an argon green laser with a wavelength of 532 nm, a power of 21.4 mW and calibrated with a silicon sample. The focal spot is about 720 nm on the cutter surface. Considering an absorption coefficient of  $2 \cdot 10^7 \text{ m}^{-1}$  for a PDC material with 3% of cobalt [19], the maximum beam penetration can be estimated at 25 nm. The Raman measurements are then limited to the surface of the PDC.

The Raman spectra obtained with focus on the wear flat, in the PDC part, of the cutters display a peak at  $1332 \pm 0.1 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  (Fig. 12a). This

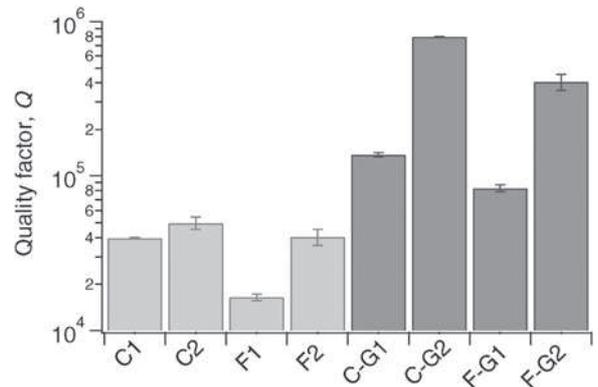
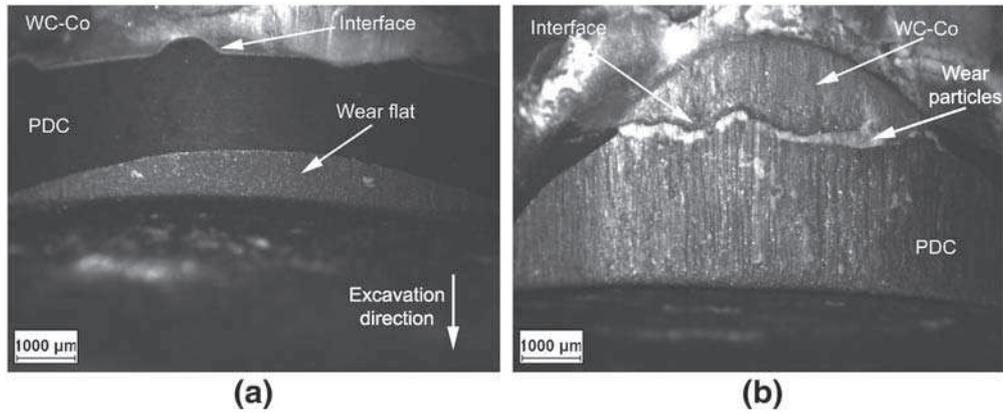


Fig. 8. Quality factor  $Q$  results of conventional and graded cutters ( $L_T = 8500$  m).



**Fig. 9.** Optical microscope observation of the C-G1 wear flat: a – wear flat only in the PDC part ( $L_T = 1360\text{m}$ ); b – wear flat spread in the WC-Co substrate ( $L_T = 19720\text{m}$ ).

peak represents the  $sp^3$  bond of diamond. Obviously, this peak can also be observed in the PDC part of an unworn cutter surface at  $1333.9 \pm 0.04 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ . The peak shift is then due to the residual stresses in the PDC part of the new cutters [20]. These residual stresses are relaxed near the wear flat during experiments. Two other peaks are observed at  $1359.7 \pm 0.5 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ , broadening the diamond peak (Fig. 12b), and at  $1580 \pm 0.1 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  on the spectra both corresponding to a  $sp^2$  bond. These positions are characteristic of graphite and confirm the transformation of metastable diamond on the worn PDC surface during excavation as a wear mechanism. In addition, a large peak is observed between  $1400 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $1500 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  corresponding to another  $sp^2$  bond. This highlights that the PDC also undergoes an amorphization during wear. This amorphization also acts on the broadening of the  $sp^3$  diamond peak [21].

To complete these chemical analyzes, XRD measurements were performed using a diffractometer (X'PERT Philips MRD) with  $\text{CuK}\alpha$  radiation source beam at 40 kV and 50 mA. The XRD analyzes were carried out with  $2\theta$  Bragg angles from  $10^\circ$  to  $60^\circ$  and a step size of  $0.02^\circ$ . These measurements were focused in the PDC part on the wear flat. The diffractograms show the sharp diamond peak at  $43.92^\circ$  [22] and others peaks corresponding to transfers from the rock on the wear flat (Fig. 13). One of these transfers was identified as the quartz particles with the (101) peak at  $26.64^\circ$  [23]. The cobalt phase is not visible on the diffractograms of the worn surfaces. The irregular form of the diffractograms background also indicates that amorphous material from the rock is transferred on the cutters. The graphite is not detected

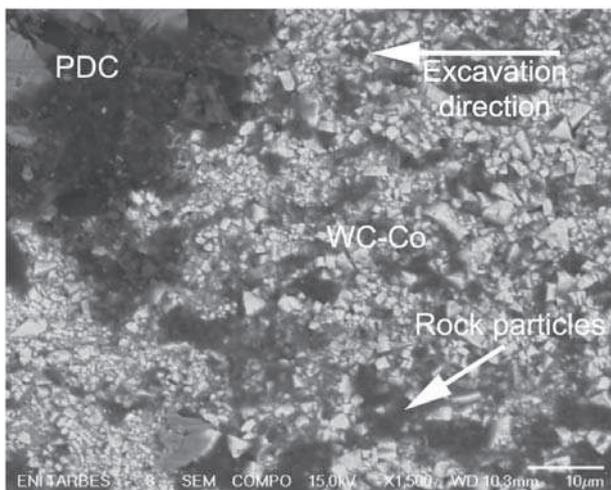
with XRD technique because of the interference of its peaks on the diffractogram with the ones of the rock transfer. The most intense peak of the graphite is too close to the quartz (101) peak at a  $2\theta$  Bragg angle of  $26.611^\circ$  [24]. The other peaks are hidden by the XRD signal background.

## 6. Discussions

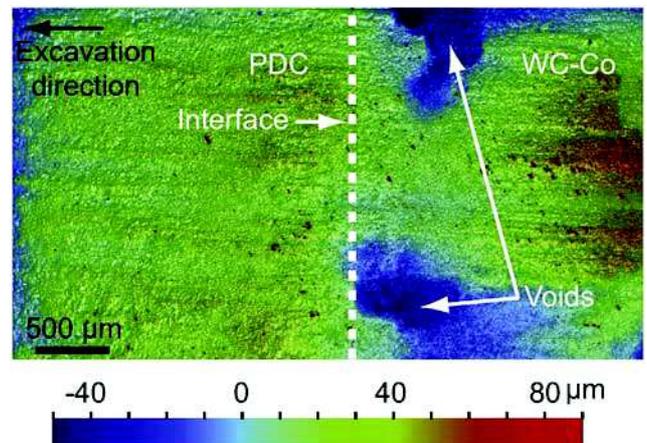
### 6.1. Wear mechanisms

The PDC worn surfaces are difficult to characterize. The abraded polycrystalline microstructure is hardly visible by optical or SEM observations. However, based on the literature and the results obtained in this work, wear mechanisms of PDC cutters can be proposed here. An analysis of the different material flows inside and outside the contact helps to describe the contact dynamics [25]. In this approach, the tribological cycle deals with:

- The particles detachment from the PDC part, the WC-Co part (if the wear flat reaches the substrate) and from the rock generates the source flow  $Q_s$ . This flow is then mainly composed by abrasive quartz particles extracted from the mortar ring;
- The circulation of these particles in the contact (third body) forms the internal flow  $Q_i$ . The internal flow leads the wear debris to accommodate the velocity gradient in the contact;
- If debris leaving the interface come back in the sliding contact, this particles defines the recycling flow  $Q_r$ . As the cutter/rock contact is refreshed by the cutting action, this flow cannot be considered here;



**Fig. 10.** SEM observation by backscattered electron analysis of C-G1 wear flat near the interface in the WC-Co substrate ( $L_T = 19720\text{m}$ ): the PDC part and the rock particles are black and the prismatic WC grains are white.



**Fig. 11.** Optical profilometer topography of the C1 wear flat spread in the WC-Co substrate ( $L_T = 17680\text{m}$ ).

**Table 4**

Wear flats roughness in the PDC part of cutters F2, F-G2, C2 and C-G2 considering a zone of 2 mm × 2 mm ( $L_T > 14000$  m).

Cutters	F2	F-G2	C2	C-G2
$R_a$ ( $\pm 0.3 \mu\text{m}$ )	2.9	2.4	4.5	3.2

- The wear flow  $Q_w$  is created when particles from the third body definitively leaves the contact.

In a kinematic point of view, during the rock excavation, quartz particles are introduced in the cutter/rock contact. Then, these abrasive particles may provoke intergranular and transgranular cracks propagation in the sintered diamond skeleton (microcutting action) and remove diamond grains and fragments of these grains. In the same time, the ductile cobalt phase surrounding the diamond grains is also extracted and goes in the interface. When the wear flat reaches the WC-Co substrate, the quartz particles remove the cobalt binder leading to the decohesion and the extraction of WC grain fragments [26]. After this critical stage, the wear alternate between the WC-Co and the harder PDC part.

The cutters wear is then mainly created by the circulation of abrasive quartz particles. Therefore, the wear kinetic increases if the flow of quartz particles grows or if these abrasive particles are stabilized in the contact. The stabilization of particle in the sliding contact occurs when the wear spreads in the WC-Co substrate. Indeed, as seen above, voids are formed in the substrate part of the wear flat generating debris trapping in the contact (Fig. 14). A part of the debris flows back to the PDC part increasing the wear rate of the cutter. In addition, a greater amount of cobalt is introduced in the contact from the WC-Co substrate. This greater binder phase flow bring more stabilization and cohesion to abrasive particles under the wear flat which could also explain a wear rate increase [27].

Finally, the thermal wear and more generally the tribological transformed structures are other significant mechanisms occurring in the cutter/rock contact. The PDC is transformed in graphite or in amorphous carbon on the wear flat. These new phases are then easily abraded by the rock. In extreme thermomechanical conditions, the TTS lead to the highest wear kinetics. In this study, the thermal wear is a minor mechanism regarding to the abrasive wear. Indeed, this wear is associated to smooth wear surfaces or to visible wear scars (grain boundary weakening and grain pullouts) [5]. In this study, the wear flats (spread in the

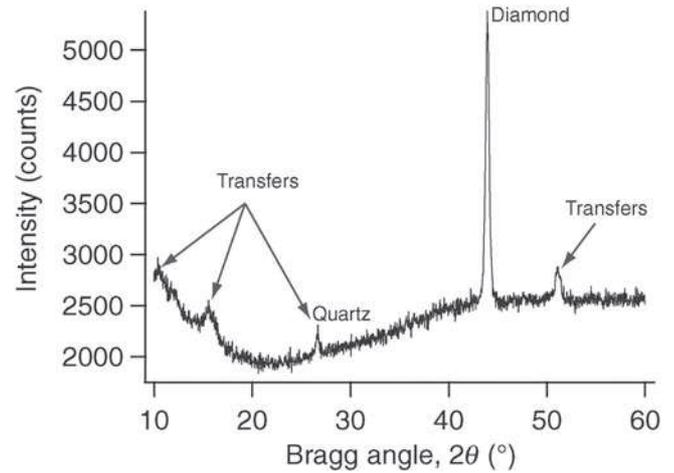


Fig. 13. XRD analysis of the C1 wear flat in the PDC part.

PDC and the WC-Co substrate) display macroscopic abrasive scratches along the excavation direction.

## 6.2. Cutter properties and wear

As seen above, at equivalent manufacturing process, C cutters have greater quality factors than F cutters. In this way, other parameters can be predominant and can be more influential than the diamond grain size of the PDC cutters on wear. Even if coarse grains lead to deeper abrasive scratches, the energy needed to create intergranular crack and pullout diamond grains during wear can depend on various parameters (e.g. the cohesion between the grains and the residual stresses in the PDC [14]).

Next, as expected, the highest conditions of the HPHT2 cycle lead to a better wear resistance. Again, this can be explained by a better bridging realized between the diamond grains during sintering. In this way, the HPHT2 cycle reduces the propagation of intergranular cracks in the PDC microstructure and then the abrasion of cutters.

Eventually, the graded cutters show a greater wear resistance than the conventional cutters. The reactive imbibition and the boride formation may chemically influence the diamond microstructure and act on toughness of the PDC cutters. In addition, the borides formed at the PDC/WC-Co interface reduce the thermal expansion coefficient difference between the substrate and the diamond part. This should induce

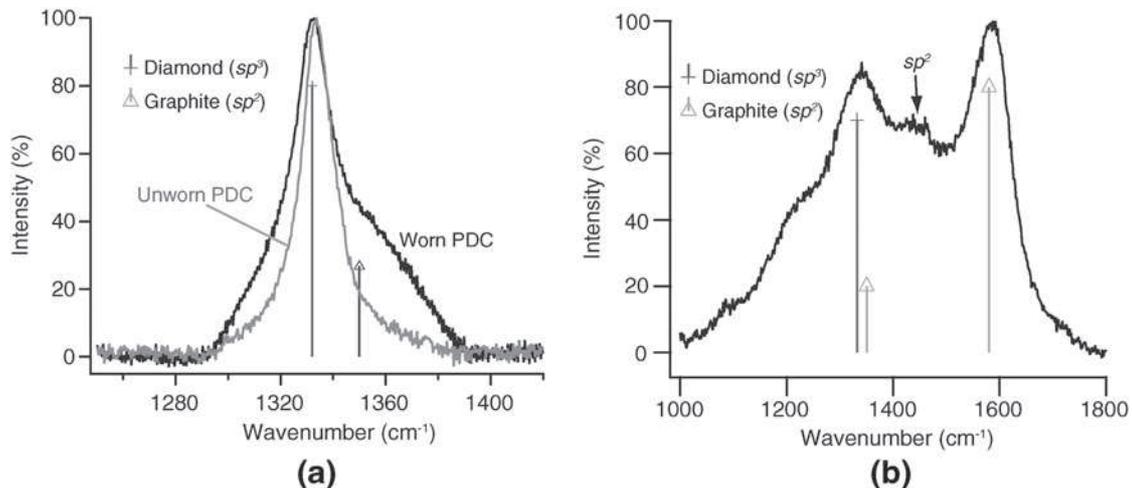
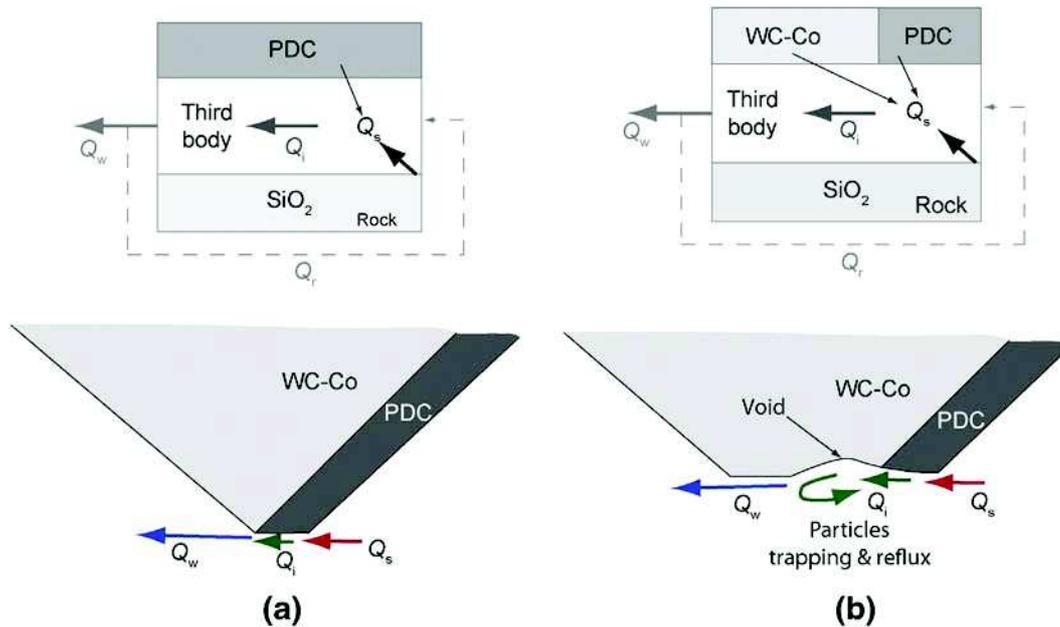


Fig. 12. Raman spectra of the C1 PDC part: a – spectrum centered on the  $sp^3$  peak for an unworn and a worn cutter; b – global spectrum with focus on the wear flat.



**Fig. 14.** Tribological circuit diagram with flows  $Q_s$ ,  $Q_i$ ,  $Q_w$  and  $Q_r$  (respectively source flow, internal flow, wear flow and recycling flow) and circulation of particles under the wear flat in the contact cutter/rock: a - wear only in the PDC; a wear spread in the WC-Co substrate.

a lower residual stresses gradient in the cutter and then reduce the residual stresses in traction (i.e. axial and shear components [14]) in the diamond part. Another interest of borides could appear when the cutters are worn until the WC-Co substrate. The hardening of the WC-Co by these borides should limit voids formation and cobalt depletion near the interface. Consequently, the trapping, the stabilization and cohesion of abrasive debris in the contact could be moderated by the reactive imbibition process.

Finally, the results show that the reactive imbibition process can significantly enhance the abrasive wear resistance of cutters with coarse diamond grains. In other word, graded cutters based on potentially impact resistant microstructure can also be characterized by a high wear resistance.

## 7. Conclusion

The excavation performances and the wear behavior of conventional PDC cutters and graded PDC cutters by reactive imbibition were characterized. The results concerning the relation between cutters properties and the wear performances, show that:

- The control of the HPHT process conditions can enhance the wear resistance by realizing a better bridging between the diamond grains;
- The diamond grains size is not necessarily the main factor influencing the wear behavior of cutters;
- The reactive imbibition process enhances the wear resistance of the cutters;
- Potentially impact resistant PDC cutters, because of a coarse diamond microstructure, can also be wear resistant by performing a reactive imbibition process.

Regarding to a third body approach, different wear mechanisms are highlighted:

- As in the real conditions of excavation, abrasion is the main wear mechanism here. Detached quartz particles from the rock produce longitudinal scratches on the cutter along the cutting direction;
- The wear rate increase produced when the wear flat spreads in the substrate can be explained by the formation of voids. Quartz particles are then trapped in these voids and a more severe abrasion is then

realized. A greater flow of cobalt introduced in the contact could also explain an increase of wear kinetic. The reactive imbibition process limit the formation of these voids and the flow of cobalt at the interface;

- The transformation of diamond in graphite and amorphous carbon during the excavation is clearly identified here as a secondary thermomechanical wear mechanism.

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