WELLHEAD SYSTEM HAVING WICKER SEALING SURFACE

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates in general to a method and apparatus to form a high pressure seal between two wellbore members, and in particular to wickers and an annular sealing ring having an increased rated working pressure.

2. Brief Description of Related Art

[0002] In hydrocarbon production wells, a wellhead housing is located at the upper end of the well. The wellhead housing is a large tubular member having an axial bore extending through it. Casing will extend into the well and will be cemented in place. A casing hanger, which is on the upper end of the casing, will land within the wellhead housing. The exterior of the casing hanger is spaced from the bore of the wellhead housing by an annular clearance which provides a pocket for receiving an annulus seal.

[0003] There are many types of annulus seals, including rubber, rubber combined with metal, and metal-to-metal. One metal-to-metal seal in use has a U-shape, having inner and outer walls or legs separated from each other by an annular clearance. An energizing ring, which has smooth inner and outer diameters, is pressed into this clearance to force the legs apart to seal in engagement with the bore and with the exterior of the casing hanger.

[0004] Some annular seals utilize wickers. Wickers may be located on the exterior of the casing hanger, in the bore of the wellhead housing, or both. The outer leg of the seal embeds into the wickers of the bore while the inner leg of the seal embeds into the wickers of the casing hanger. This locks the annulus seal in place, providing axial restraint, as well as forming a seal.

[0005] The sealing wickers are machined directly into the bore of the high pressure housing and landing subs or the neck of the casing hangers. The annulus seal is made of a sufficiently deformable metal to allow it to deform against the wickers of the casing hanger. The deformation occurs as the wickers "bite" into the annulus seal. In order to cause the seal to deform without damaging the wickers, the annulus seal is made of a metal that is softer than the steel used for the casing hangers.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] Various embodiments of this invention provide a seal between a wellhead housing and a casing hanger, or between other wellbore members such as a landing sub, wherein the seal is formed between wickers having a higher yield strength than the underlying material, and, in some embodiments, an annular sealing ring also having a higher yield strength than a conventional annular sealing ring.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0007] So that the manner in which the features, advantages and objects of the invention, as well as others which will become apparent, are attained and can be understood in more detail, more particular description of the invention briefly summarized above may be had by reference to the embodiment thereof which is illustrated in the appended drawings, which drawings form a part of this specification. It is to be noted, however, that the drawings illustrate only a preferred embodiment of the invention and is therefore not to be considered limiting of its scope as the invention may admit to other equally effective embodiments.

[0008] Figure 1 is a sectional view of a casing hanger, wellhead housing, seal, and energizing ring.

[0009] Figure 2 is a sectional view showing an exemplary embodiment of a casing hanger with a hardened wicker inlay and a seal.

[0010] Figure 3 is a detail view of the casing hanger and seal of Figure 2 with the seal energized.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0011] The present invention will now be described more fully hereinafter with reference to the accompanying drawings which illustrate embodiments of the invention. This invention may, however, be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as limited to the illustrated embodiments set forth herein. Rather, these embodiments are provided so that this disclosure will be thorough and complete, and will fully convey the scope of the invention to those skilled in the art. Like numbers refer to like elements throughout, and the prime notation, if used, indicates similar elements in alternative embodiments.

[0012] Referring to FIG. 1, a wellhead housing 10 is presented. In the illustrated embodiment, the wellhead housing 10 is a conventional high pressure housing for a subsea well. It is a large tubular member located at the upper end of a well, such as a subsea well. Wellhead housing 10 has an axial bore 12 extending through it. A casing hanger 14 lands in the wellhead housing 10. Casing hanger 14 is a tubular conduit secured to the upper end of a string of casing (not shown). Casing hanger 14 has an upward facing shoulder 16 on its exterior. The exterior wall 18 of casing hanger 14 is parallel to the wall of bore 12 but spaced inwardly. This results in an annular pocket or clearance between casing hanger exterior wall 18 and bore 12. A set of wickers 20 is located on the exterior wall 18 of casing hanger 14. A similar set of wickers 22 is located radially across on bore 12. Wickers 20, 22 are grooves defined by parallel circumferential ridges and valleys. They are not threads.

[0013] A seal assembly 26 lands in the pocket between casing hanger exterior wall 18 and bore wall 12. Seal assembly 26 may be made up entirely of metal components. These components may include a generally U-shaped seal member 28. Seal member 28 has an outer wall or leg 30 and a parallel inner wall or leg 32, the legs 30, 32 being connected together at the bottom by a base and open at the top. The inner diameter of outer leg 30 is radially spaced outward from the outer diameter of inner leg 32. This results in an annular clearance 36 between legs 30, 32. The inner diameter and the outer diameter are smooth cylindrical surfaces parallel with each other. Similarly, the inner diameter of inner leg 32 and the outer diameter of outer leg 30 are smooth, cylindrical, parallel surfaces.

[0014] An energizing ring 40 is employed to force legs 30, 32 radially apart from each other and into sealing engagement with wickers 20, 22. The wickers 20, 22 bite into the inner leg 30 and

outer leg 32, respectively, of the seal assembly 26 as the energizing ring 40 forces the legs 30, 32 against the wickers 20, 22. Energizing ring 40 has an outer diameter that will frictionally engage the inner diameter of outer leg 30. Energizing ring 40 has an inner diameter that will frictionally engage the outer diameter of inner leg 32. The radial thickness of energizing ring 40 is greater than the initial radial dimension of the clearance 36.

[0015] Referring to Figure 2, an embodiment of a wellhead system 48 utilizing high strength wickers 50, 52 to seal and secure wellhead members is presented. In the illustrated embodiment, the high strength wickers 50, 52 are located on the casing hanger 56 and high pressure housing 54, respectively. However, the high strength wickers may be located on other components, or on only one of these components.

[0016] In the illustrated embodiment, the high strength wickers 50, 52 are formed in an inlay material deposited on casing hanger 56 and the high pressure housing 54, respectively. In this embodiment, an elongated groove 60 is formed on the bore of high pressure housing 54. Elongated groove 60 may have an axial length that is longer than the axial length of outer leg 62 of seal member 64. In an exemplary embodiment, elongated groove 60 has an axial length of roughly 3.5 inches. However, the axial length may be longer or shorter. In the illustrated embodiment, elongated groove 60 is filled with inlay 68, which is made of a material having a yield strength and a hardness greater than the yield strength and hardness of high pressure housing 54. In this embodiment, the yield strength and hardness of inlay 68 are also greater than the yield strength and the hardness of seal member 64. Similarly, an elongated groove 66 is formed on an outer diameter of casing hanger 56. Elongated groove 66 is filled with inlay 72, which is made of a material having a yield strength and a hardness greater than the yield strength and hardness of casing hanger 56. In this embodiment, the yield strength and hardness of inlay 72 are also greater than the yield strength and hardness of seal member 64. Casing hanger elongated groove 66 may have an axial length that is longer than the axial length of inner leg 70 of seal member 64. In an exemplary embodiment, casing hanger elongated groove 66 has an axial length of roughly 3.5 inches. However, the axial length may be longer or shorter.

[0017] In the illustrated embodiment, high pressure housing 54 and casing hanger 56 are comprised of 8630-modified low alloy steel. The 8630-modified law alloy steel has a yield strength of, approximately, 80 ksi. The standard for materials used in corrosive environments in

oil and gas production is NACE (National Association of Corrosion Engineers) standard “MR 0175”, entitled: “Petroleum and natural gas industries-Materials for use in H_2S-containing environments in oil and gas production.” For corrosion protection, NACE standard MR 0175 limits the hardness of 8630-modified low alloy steel for use in corrosive environments in oil and gas production to a hardness of 22 Rockwell C ("HRC").

[0018] Inlays 68, 72 may be made from a high strength alloy, such as a nickel alloy. In some embodiments, inlays 72 and 68 are made from an austenitic nickel-chromium-based alloy such as nickel alloy 725 (UNS N07725). In an exemplary embodiment, the high strength alloy used for inlays 72 and 68 has a yield strength of 120-130 ksi. The hardness of the inlay varies depending on the type of inlay material and the subsequent treatments such as heat treating. The hardness can be between roughly less than 20 HRC to greater than roughly 37 HRC. Preferably, the hardness is at least approximately 22 HRC. In some embodiments, the inlay hardness may be roughly 27-29 HRC. The greater hardness of the wickers 50, 52 formed in inlays 68, 72 enables them to bite into the seal to a greater degree than similar wickers made of 8630-modified low alloy steel. Thus, producing a better seal. The higher yield strength of the wickers 50, 52 formed in inlays 68, 72 enables them to restrain axial movement of the seal to a greater degree than similar wickers made of 8630-modified low alloy steel.

[0019] Inlay 72, 68 may be formed by a variety of manufacturing techniques. In an exemplary embodiment, inlays 72, 68 are formed by welding the inlay material onto the surface of elongated grooves 66, 60. A welder may, for example, make multiple passes to fill grooves 66, 60 with a weld bead. Other forms of deposition may be used. The radial thickness of inlays 72, 68 may be any thickness including, for example, roughly 0.125 inches to 0.5 inches.

[0020] After inlay 72, 68 is created, each inlay surface is machined to form wickers 50, 52. Wickers 50 are a series of parallel grooves on the surface of inlay 72. Wickers 52 are a series of parallel grooves on the surface of inlay 68. Each groove is defined by a valley having two sides, the sides of two adjacent valleys forming a ridge. The sides of an individual valley may have the same pitch or may have different pitches.

[0021] After depositing inlay 72, 68 material and/or after machining wickers 50, 52, the inlay material may be heat treated. Heat treating may be used to relieve residual stress present in the inlay as a result of the heating and cooling process that occurs during the inlay deposition

process. In some embodiments, stress-relief heat treatments are used to relieve stress in the inlay but not to substantially alter the as-deposited hardness of the inlay. In these exemplary embodiments, the inlay material is left in its "soft," or annealed, state, which still has a greater hardness than the hardness of 33 ksi plain carbon steel. Some nickel alloys become harder as a result of heat treatment at temperatures and for durations beyond stress-relief heat treatment. Additional heat treating of inlays 72 and 68 may be used to harden, or "age," the inlay material to a higher hardness than the "soft" state. The increased hardness may cause increased brittleness in the bond between the inlays 72, 68 and the surface of the elongated grooves 66, 60. In an exemplary embodiment, inlay 72, 68 are heat treated for approximately four hours to provide stress relief after wickers 50, 52 are machined into inlay 72, 68.

[0022] In the illustrated embodiment, seal member 64 is formed from a material having a lower yield strength than the yield strength of wickers 50, 52. By using a high yield strength material for wickers 50, 52, it is possible to use a second material having a high yield strength for seal member 64, provided that the seal member 64 yield strength is lower than that of wickers 50, 52. Once energized, a seal having a higher yield strength than conventional seal member 26 would have a greater ability to resist axial movement of the seal. Seal member 64 could, for example, be made of low carbon steel having a 45 ksi minimum yield strength. Seal member 64 may, however, be made of steel having a minimum yield strength of 15 ksi.

[0023] The seal assembly comprises a generally U-shaped seal member 64. Seal member 64 has an outer wall or leg 62 and a parallel inner wall or leg 70, the legs 62, 70 being connected together at the bottom by a base and open at the top. The inner diameter 76 of outer leg 62 is radially spaced outward from the outer diameter 78 of inner leg 70. This results in an annular clearance 80 between legs 62, 70. The inner diameter 76 and the outer diameter 78 are smooth cylindrical surfaces parallel with each other. Similarly, the inner diameter of inner leg 82 and the outer diameter of outer leg 84 are smooth, cylindrical, parallel surfaces.

[0024] Referring to Figure 3, wickers 52 are best able to form a seal when wickers 52 are able to "bite" into the surface 84 of the annular seal leg 62. As seal leg 62 is expanded into wickers 52, the surface 84 of seal leg 62 flows around wickers 52 as plastic deformation of seal leg 62 occurs. In an exemplary embodiment, the tips of the wickers 52 achieve a depth of approximately 0.030" below the surface 84 of the annular seal member 62. If the seal member

62 is made from a material that is too hard in relation to the wickers 52, the wickers 52 may deform rather than biting approximately 0.030" into the seal member 62. High strength wickers 52, such as wickers formed from nickel alloy 725, are able to bite into a high-hardness seal member 62 without deformation. Outer leg 62 is shown for illustrative purposes in Figure 3, but the same principles apply to inner leg 70.

[0025] Referring again to Figure 2, energizing ring 88 applies force to press the legs 62, 70 of the seal apart, causing seal legs 62, 70 engage the wickers 52, 50. Energizing ring 88 may have a wider cross-section than a conventional energizing ring 40 (Figure 1) to create more interference with seal legs 62, 70 and thus cause increased radial contact force between the seal legs 62, 70 and the wicker sealing surface 52, 50. The increased compressive force between the seal surfaces 82, 84 and the wickers 50, 52 creates a tighter seal against wellbore pressure. If the force applied by the energizing ring 88 is too high in relation to the yield strength of the wicker material, the tips of the wickers 50, 52 may fold in response to the compressive force from the seal 64. The compressive force that causes high yield strength wickers to fail is significantly higher than the compressive force that causes conventional wickers to fail. Some embodiments use a conventional seal 28 with high strength wickers 50, 52.

[0026] A seal assembly that utilizes high strength wickers 50, 52 provides several advantages over conventional wickers. For example, a conventional seal 28 and wicker 20, 22 combination may be able to withstand a wellbore pressure of 15,000 psi. However, a high strength seal, pressed against high strength wickers with great force, may achieve a tighter seal and thus withstand a wellbore pressure of 20,000 psi, or more. In addition, objects such as a drill bit or a spinning drill string could cause damage to the sealing surfaces and wickers 50, 52. Damage to the sealing surfaces and wickers 50, 52, even minor damage, may result in an imperfect seal. A scratch may serve as a pathway for high pressure fluids and gasses to pass between the annular seal and the sealing surface. However, the high strength wickers 50, 52 are more resistant to scratches, dents, and other damage than conventional strength wickers. A material with a high yield strength, such as a 120 ksi minimum yield strength, is less likely to deform when impacted by another object such as a drill string.

[0027] While the invention has been shown or described in only some of its forms, it should be apparent to those skilled in the art that it is not so limited, but is susceptible to various changes without departing from the scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A wellhead assembly characterized by:

an outer tubular wellhead member (54);

an inner tubular wellhead member (56) adapted to land within the outer tubular wellhead member (54), defining a seal pocket between them;

an annular recess (60) formed in at least one of the wellhead members;

an inlay (68) located in the recess, the inlay (68) comprising a material having a yield strength greater than the yield strength of the material of the wellhead member having the annular recess; and

a plurality of circumferentially extending, parallel ridges (52) formed in the inlay (68).

2. The assembly of claim 1, wherein the yield strength of the material of the sealing surface is at least 120 ksi.

3. An annular seal (64) adapted to be disposed within the seal pocket and to be urged against the ridges (52) on the inlay (68), wherein the annular seal (64) is formed from a material having a yield strength of at least 45 ksi.

4. The assembly of claim 1, wherein the inlay (68) material comprises nickel alloy 725.

5. The assembly of claim 1, wherein the annular recess (60, 66) is formed on each wellhead member and an inlay (68, 72) with ridges (50, 52) is formed in each annular recess.

6. The assembly according to claim 1, wherein the inlay (68) has a hardness of 27-29 HRC.

7. The assembly of claim 1, further characterized by an annular seal (64) that is adapted to be disposed within the seal pocket and to be urged against the ridges (52) on the inlay (68), wherein the annular seal (64) is formed of a metal having a yield strength less than the yield strength of the inlay (68).

8. The assembly of claim 7, wherein the ridges (52) are adapted to deform the surface of the annular seal (64).

9. The assembly of claim 3, wherein the plurality of ridges (52) define a plurality of grooves, the grooves having a depth less than the depth of the inlay (68).