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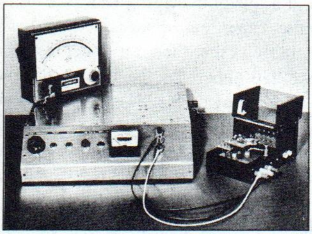


Testing for Forward-Bias Second Breakdown in Power Transistors

by D. A. Moe

The addition of "safe-operating-area" curves to power-switching transistor data for JEDEC registration and to manufacturers' data sheets has made necessary the development of non-destructive forward-bias second-breakdown test facilities. This Note describes the design of a test facility which determines the forward-bias second-breakdown safe operating locus for power transistors and shows detailed schematic diagrams of test circuits which can be used for devices with collector-current ratings up to 2.5 amperes and sustaining collector-to-emitter voltage $V_{CEO}(sus)$ ratings up to 300 volts, or with ratings to 5 amperes and 100 volts.

Causes of Second Breakdown

The safe operating area of a power transistor is bounded by a locus divided into four discrete segments, each representing a particular limiting condition. As shown in Fig. 1, the limiting factors are the maximum continuous-collector-current rating of the transistor, the maximum power-dissipation rating, second breakdown, and the sustaining voltage $V_{CEO}(sus)$ of the device.

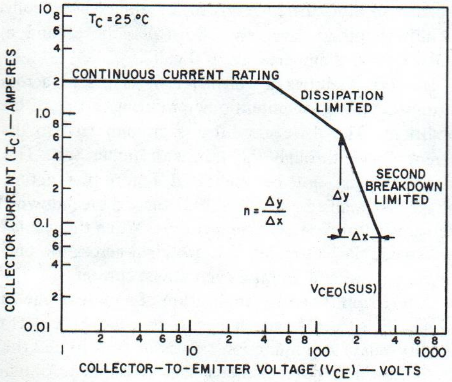


Fig. 1— A typical safe-operating-area curve.

Forward-bias second breakdown ($I_{S/b}$) in a power device is manifested by localized heating of the transistor pellet, as shown in Fig. 2. The average collector-junction temperature, T_J, of a power transistor may be calculated as follows:

$$T_J = T_C + P_{avg}\theta_{J\text{-}C}$$

where T_C is the case temperature in °C, P_{avg} is the average power dissipation in watts, and $\theta_{J\text{-}C}$ is the junction-to-case thermal resistance in °C per watt. However, the actual junction temperature can vary from point to point on the chip as a result of current-crowding that causes higher isolated dissipation. As a result, a localized thermal runaway may occur. In the forward-biased mode, such local heating is most likely to occur at the emitter edge because, under forward-bias conditions, lateral base current creates an electric field or voltage gradient in the base, as shown in Fig. 2. The direction of this voltage gradient causes greater forward bias at the emitter periphery than at the center. Therefore most injection occurs at the periphery, and the current density is greater. As the concentrated current flows across the depletion region, local power dissipation occurs and causes local heating. If the current density exceeds a

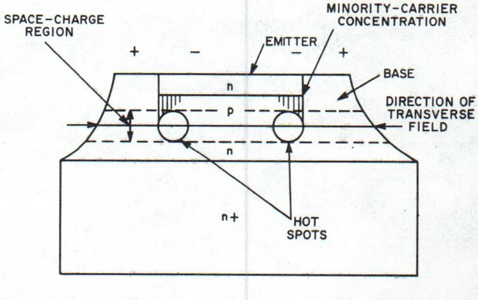


Fig. 2— Cross-section of a power transistor showing development of hot spots under forward bias.

critical level, the heat that is generated causes the local base-to-emitter voltage to decrease to a level that causes further injection, and collector-to-emitter current flow becomes regenerative. If this regenerative process is allowed to continue, device destruction follows. The current crowding may be aggravated by a non-homogeneous collector-base junction or by mounting-system imperfections such as solder voids.

A Second-Breakdown Test Facility

Fig. 3 shows a simplified schematic of a test set designed to determine the forward-bias second-breakdown safe operating locus for power transistors. This test facility is capable of determining this locus non-destructively, and therefore can be used to perform 100-per-cent tests of transistor capability in production without destroying transistors. This type of production test is usually made at one point of the second-breakdown locus shown on the published data. Determination of the second-breakdown limit for registration of a new device of a particular structure and geometry previously required the destructive finding of the $I_{S/b}$ limit of many individual transistors. Although each device would yield one data point, the points would not necessarily be on the same second-breakdown locus because the relative second-breakdown capability would vary from device to device. This procedure would therefore not yield accurate information about the actual shape of the $I_{S/b}$ locus. It has been found that the slope, n, of the forward-bias second-breakdown locus ($I = KV^{-n}$) plotted on log-log coordinates is essentially constant for a particular device structure and geometry.

The second-breakdown test set shown in Fig. 3 operates in either of two modes: "normal" operation or "shut-down" operation. There are two feedback drive amplifiers in the circuit. One drives the transistor under test to the magnitude of collector current programmed by adjustment of a potentiometer. The current-sensing feedback loop is arranged so that only actual collector current flows through the sensing resistor; no base current flows in the mesh common to that resistor. The second amplifier compares the collector-to-emitter voltage of a transistor in series with the one being tested to a reference voltage and maintains the pass-transistor voltage constant at six volts, independent of test-current magnitude.

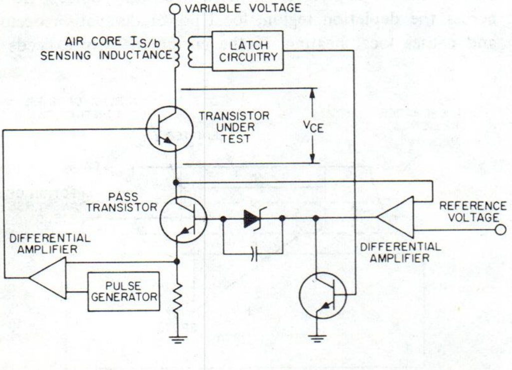


Fig. 3— Simplified schematic of test set for second-breakdown current ($I_{S/b}$).

The test voltage, V_{CE}, is varied by adjustment of the power-supply voltage across the transistor under test, the series pass transistor, and a one-ohm sensing resistor. During a normal test, the pulse generator applies an essentially square pulse of current through the transistor under test; the relatively short rise and fall times can be neglected. The current through the pass transistor tracks the current through the transistor under test. If the device being tested is operating within its safe area, no anomalies in transistor current or voltage occur and no degradation results during the test.

If the transistor is operated beyond its safe operating area, distinct changes occur in current and voltage at the initiation of second breakdown. The collector-to-emitter voltage of the transistor suddenly drops to a low value, while the current rises sharply. The second-breakdown test method shown in Fig. 3 takes advantage of this rapid rise in collector current.

For detection of second breakdown, an air-core inductor is placed in series with collector of the transistor under test. During normal operation of the test set, the voltage developed across this inductor is small because of the relatively long test-current-pulse rise time. During second breakdown, however, the rapidly rising collector current creates a high voltage across the inductor. A secondary winding then ac couples this voltage to a detection circuit which reverse-biases the series pass transistor. The inductive-detection approach is independent of test-current magnitude and reacts instead to the magnitude of its first derivative.

The 2.5-Ampere/300-Volt and 5-Ampere/100-Volt Test Circuits

Two forward-bias second-breakdown facilities are shown in Fig. 4. The first is capable of making second-breakdown tests at collector-current levels to 2.5 amperes and collector-to-emitter voltage levels to 300 volts; the second makes similar tests to 5 amperes and 100 volts.

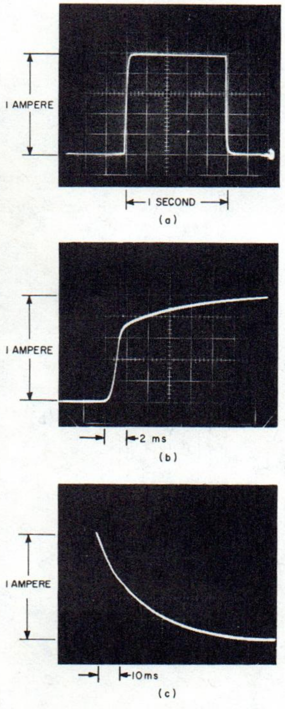
In both facilities a voltmeter V is placed across the Current-Level-Adjust potentiometer during setting of the test conditions. The drive amplifier is disconnected so that no current flows through the transistor under test. The test transistor must not be preheated before the actual test voltage is applied because the second-breakdown limit decreases with increasing temperature. While the test is being performed, the voltmeter V is switched across the one-ohm sensing resistor and monitors actual test current.

A test is initiated by application of a pulse to the gate of a 2N3228 SCR, Q1, which begins to conduct and closes a mercury relay. A unijunction transistor fires to end the test. The pulse-width potentiometer can be varied to obtain test conditions varying from dc (2 seconds) to a short pulse (100 milliseconds). The setting of the Current-Level-Adjust potentiometer determines the amplitude of the test current during the pulse. The capacitor connected across this potentiometer maintains the rise time of the pulse applied to the differential-drive amplifier at approximately 25 milliseconds, as shown in Fig. 5. If the rise time were too short, the inductive detector would trigger the latch circuitry at the beginning of a pulse and would incorrectly indicate second breakdown.

The pass-transistor regulator maintains a constant voltage across the transistor under test. The series pass transistor is always operated in the active region so that it can turn off the transistor under test within one microsecond if second breakdown occurs.

The two differential amplifiers are stabilized by means of capacitors located at several points. Stabilization of these test facilities is difficult because they are required to perform tests on devices having gain-bandwidth products f_T up to 100 MHz and at all test currents and voltages within the test-set ratings. The problem is compounded by the fact that f_T is a function of collector voltage and current and may vary for individual devices at different test conditions.

Particular care is necessary in the physical layout of a second-breakdown test facility to avoid oscillation. High-frequency oscillations may then incorrectly appear to the inductive detector as second-breakdown failures and cause the protection circuitry to be triggered. Leads should be as short as possible.



(a)

(b)

(c)

Fig. 5— Waveforms for $I_{S/b}$ test circuits of Fig. 4: (a) applied pulse; (b) turn-on time; (c) turn-off time.

In the event of second breakdown, the large current change di/dt causes a voltage to be coupled to the second-breakdown latch circuitry, Q24 and Q25. This regenerative circuitry drives the pass-transistor regulator, Q16, which then applies instantaneous negative voltage at the base of the pass transistor to interrupt the test current. A light on the front panel of the test set indicates second breakdown. The coupling capacitor in the reset circuitry for the latch is selected so that it cannot override a pulse from the second-breakdown-sensing transformer. If a shorted transistor is placed in the test socket and the reset button is depressed, the resulting instantaneous rise in primary current triggers the latch. Therefore, it is impossible to reset the facility with a shorted transistor in the socket. Although the primary inductance of the sensing transformer is very small, it helps to keep collector current from rising instantly during second breakdown. A diode clamp is employed to damp ringing voltages that might otherwise exceed the avalanche breakdown voltage of the transistor under test.

If the transistor under test has large leakage current, or if a slow thermal runaway occurs, the collector current does not rise fast enough to trigger Q24 and Q25. The latch is then triggered by back-up circuitry. The back-up circuit, which consists of Q21, Q22, and Q23, is a Schmitt trigger set to switch at a collector test current ten per cent higher than the rated value of the test facility. In this case, a relatively long time may be needed to exceed this rating.

Transistor Characterization for Forward-Bias Second Breakdown

Actual second-breakdown measurements for the RCA-2N5240 are shown in Fig. 6. The three curves indicate differences in second-breakdown capability at different case temperatures, but show that the second-breakdown loci have essentially identical slopes. The 2N5240 is a double-diffused triple epitaxial silicon power transistor having eight separate emitter sites. A small ballast is provided in series with each emitter to extend second-breakdown limits.

Characterization of a transistor for second breakdown and power handling is performed in two steps. First, the dc and pulsed power-dissipation capability of the device are calculated on the basis of its steady-state and transient thermal resistance. These curves are then checked empirically to determine at what value of collector-to-emitter voltage second breakdown begins to dominate.

To obtain a single point on the curve, the desired collector-to-emitter voltage V_{CE} is applied to the transistor under test, and a test is performed at a test-current magnitude below the expected capability of the device. If failure does not occur, the test-current magnitude is increased in steps until failure does occur. This procedure is repeated at several values of V_{CE}. During each trial, the transistor case must be at the temperature for which second-breakdown capability is being determined. Usually a

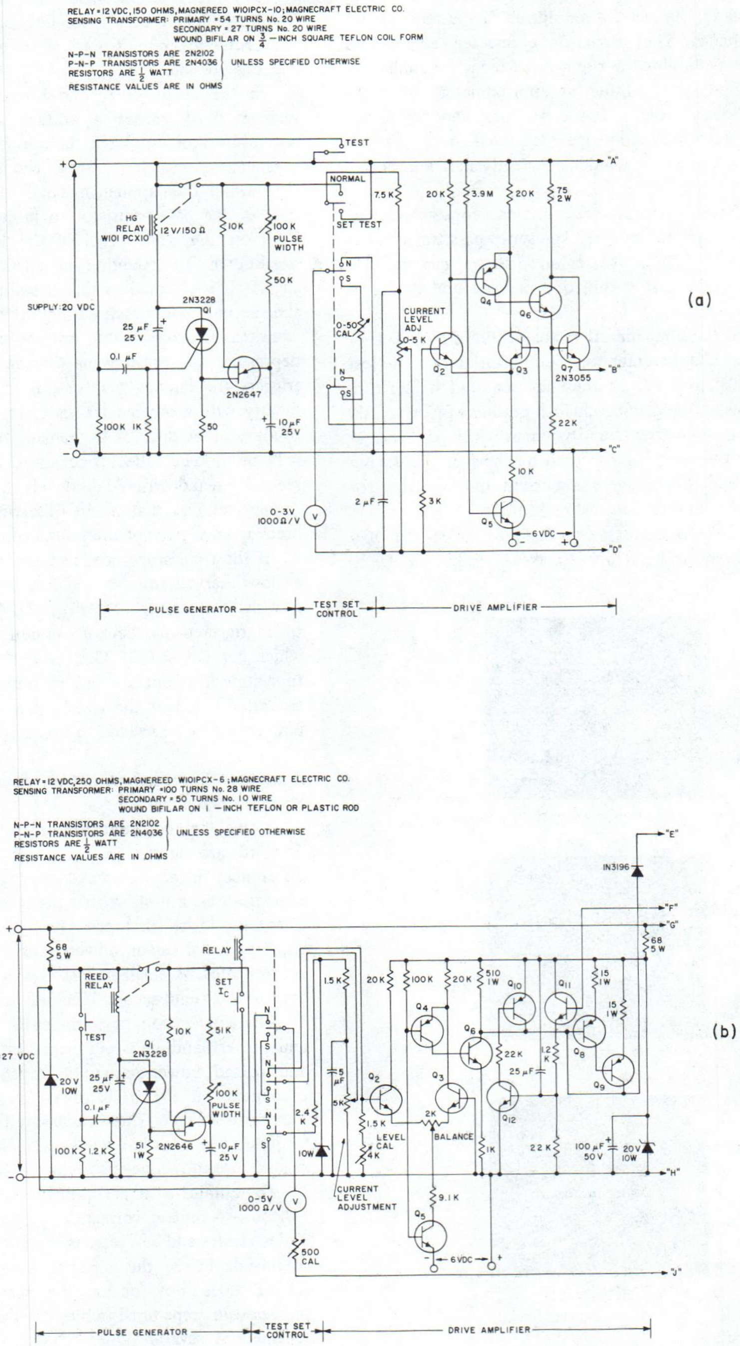


Fig. 4— Schematic diagram of $I_{S/b}$ test facilities for (a) currents to 2.5 amperes and voltages to 300 volts, and (b) currents to 5 amperes and voltages to 100 volts.

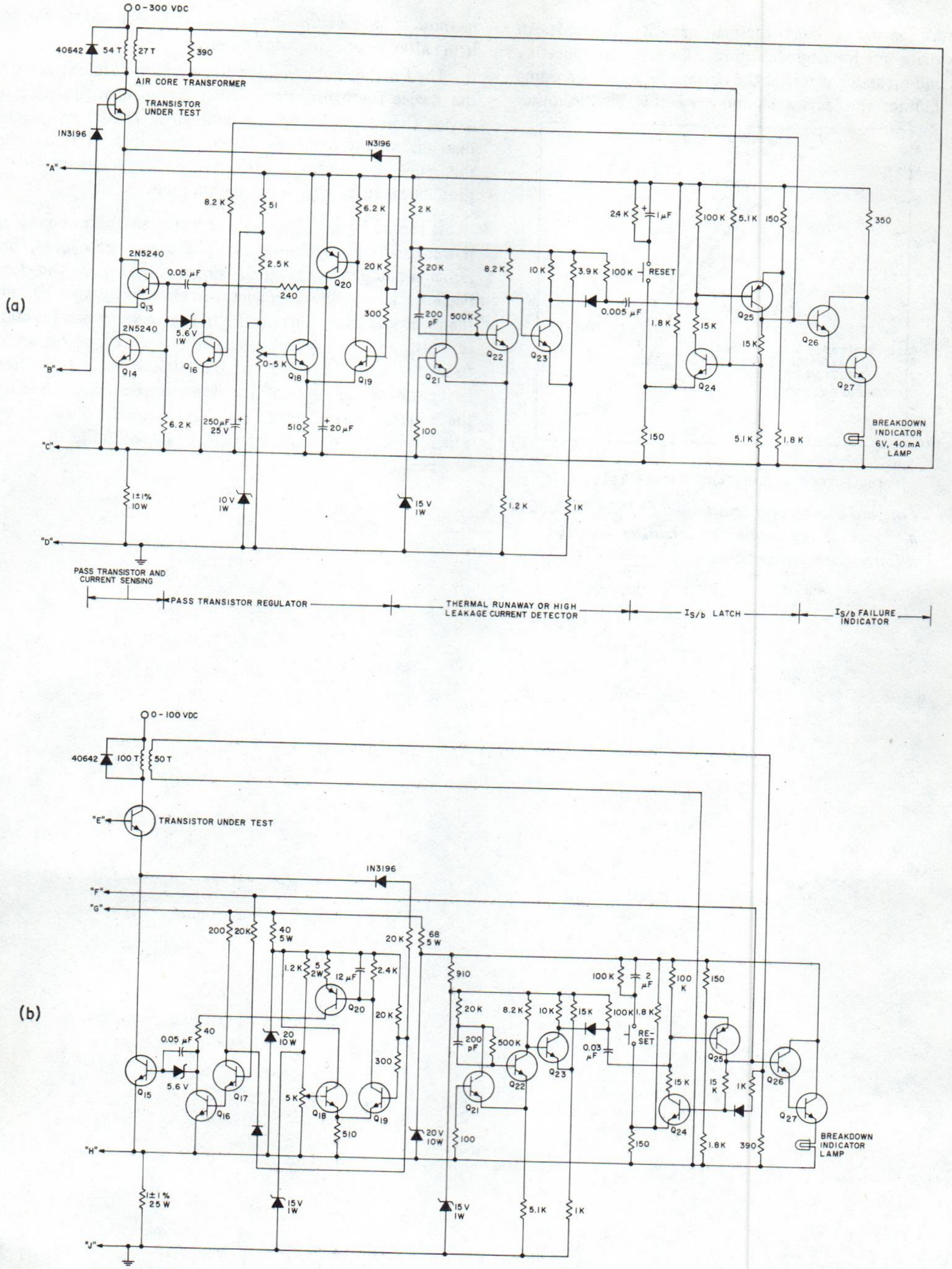


Fig. 4— Schematic diagram of $I_{S/b}$ test facilities for (a) currents to 2.5 amperes and voltages to 300 volts, and (b) currents to 5 amperes and voltages to 100 volts.

heat sink having a large thermal capacity is used. An approximate test for degradation may be made by repeating the second-breakdown test at the current level just preceding device failure; the device should pass this test. Another method is to measure changes in collector cutoff current I_{CBO} after second-breakdown failure.

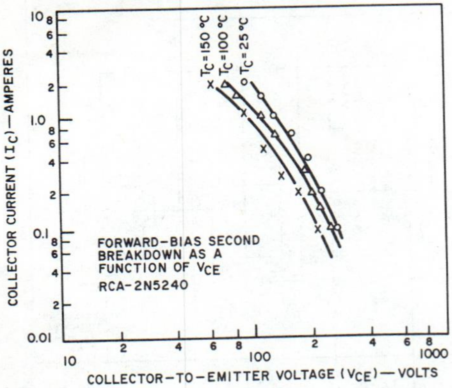


Fig. 6— Forward-bias second breakdown of RCA-2N5240 as a function of collector-to-emitter voltage for different case temperatures.

The final second-breakdown curve plotted to characterize the device for registration, which is shown in the table of device characteristics on the data sheet, has a slope greater than that of the family of devices represented. To guarantee this published curve, a 100-per-cent test is performed in production at the $I_{S/b}$ specification point.

It should be noted that there is not an abrupt change in power-handling capability along the safe-area locus, but rather a gradual change in the slope of the curve. The slope becomes less at lower collector-to-emitter voltages because the electrical base width in the transistor varies as a function of voltage. As V_{CE} decreases, the depletion-region width decreases and the electrical base width increases. These changes have the effect of decreasing current density because the minority carriers in the base have a greater distance over which to diffuse outward laterally, as shown in Fig. 2.