Journal of Alloys and Compounds 444–445 (2007) 80–83

Journal of ALLOYS AND COMPOUNDS

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The search for magnetic order in δ-Pu metal using muon spin relaxation

R.H. Heffner [a,b,*], K. Ohishi [a], M.J. Fluss [c], G.D. Morris [d], D.E. MacLaughlin [e], L. Shu [e], B.W. Chung [c], S.K. McCall [c], E.D. Bauer [b], J.L. Sarrao [b], T.U. Ito [f], W. Higemoto [a]

[a] *Japan Atomic Energy Agency, Tokai-Mura, Naka-Gun, Ibaraki-Ken 319-1195, Japan*
[b] *Los Alamos National Laboratory, MS K764, Los Alamos, NM 87545, USA*
[c] *Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, P.O. Box 808, Livermore, CA 94550, USA*
[d] *TRIUMF, 4004 Wesbrook Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 2A3*
[e] *Department of Physics, University of California, Riverside, CA 92521, USA*
[f] *Department of Physics, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Meguro-ku, Tokyo 152-8551, Japan*

Received 23 October 2006; received in revised form 1 December 2006; accepted 5 December 2006
Available online 29 January 2007

Abstract

We review results from previous muon spin relaxation (μSR) measurements in applied fields of $H_0 = 0$ and 0.25 T which established an upper limit for the ordered or disordered frozen spin moment above $T = 4$ K in δ-Pu (4.3 at.% Ga) of $\mu_{\rm ord} \le 10^{-3}\mu_{\rm B}$. In addition, we present new data in $H_0 = 0.25$ and 2 T applied field on a highly annealed δ-Pu (4.3 at.% Ga) sample. Neither the muon Knight shift ($H_0 = 2$ T) nor the inhomogeneous linewidths in the new sample show appreciable temperature dependence below about $T = 60$ K, also consistent with no spin freezing. Recent theoretical arguments advanced to explain these results are mentioned.

Keywords: Actinide alloys and compounds; Muon spectroscopies

1. Introduction

The question of whether there is magnetic order in most metals has long been settled. This is because the necessary measurement techniques (specific heat combined with neutron scattering, for example) are common, and so are the methods for readily producing high-quality materials. This has not been the case with Pu metal, however, the study of which has been hindered by difficulties in handling this toxic, radioactive material. Thus, materials containing the more stable actinide atoms have received greater attention. For example, interest in 5f-electron materials in general has been strong since the discovery of heavy fermion superconductivity in UBe_{13} [1] and UPt_3 [2] decades ago. Interest in Pu compounds, however, has recently taken root outside of the small 'Pu community' with the discovery of superconductivity in $PuMGa_5$, M = Co [3] and Rh [4].

Meanwhile, a quiet debate about the nature of the 5f electrons in Pu metal has been brewing. Pu metal exists in six allotropic phases as a function of temperature and volume. In order to account for the larger volume of the δ phase of Pu, which has fcc structure and is stable near 700 K, theorists have found it necessary to localize a significant fraction of its five 5f electrons [5]. This is in contrast to the stable, lower-volume (−25%) room-temperature α-phase of Pu, where the f-electrons are itinerant. The theoretical localization of δ-Pu's f-electrons has led to numerous predictions of magnetic order [6]. This situation led Lashley et al. to publish a compendium of experimental results refuting magnetism in δ-Pu, citing a limit for the ordered moment from neutron scattering of between 0.04 and $0.4\mu_{\rm B}$ [7].

Against this background, we began a study of both α-Pu and δ-Pu (4.3 at.% Ga) in 2004 using the muon spin relaxation technique (μSR). μSR is particularly suitable for this task because of its high sensitivity to small-moment magnetism, wherein ordered moments as small as 0.001 $\mu_{\rm B}$ can be detected. (In Kondo lattice systems, for example, small magnetic moments can survive at temperatures much less than the effective Kondo temperature.) Furthermore, because the muon is a local (interstitial) probe, the signal is a sum over points in momentum space,

* Corresponding author at: Japan Atomic Energy Agency, Tokai-Mura, Naka-Gun, Ibaraki-Ken 319-1195, Japan. Tel.: +81 29 284 3524; fax: +81 29 282 5927.
E-mail address: robert.heffner@jaea.go.jp (R.H. Heffner).

0925-8388/$ – see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.jallcom.2006.12.026

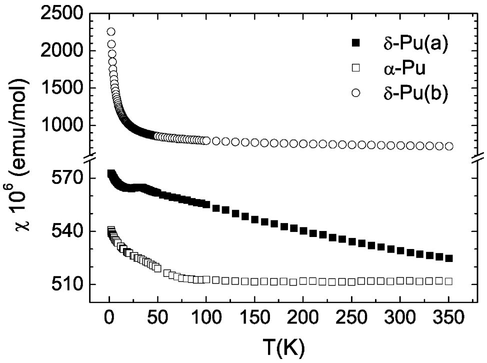

Fig. 1. Temperature dependence of the static susceptibility in 2 T applied field for the two measured δ-Pu samples: (a) annealed for 43 h at 440 °C and (b) annealed for 200 h at 465 °C. For comparison the susceptibility of α-Pu is also shown.

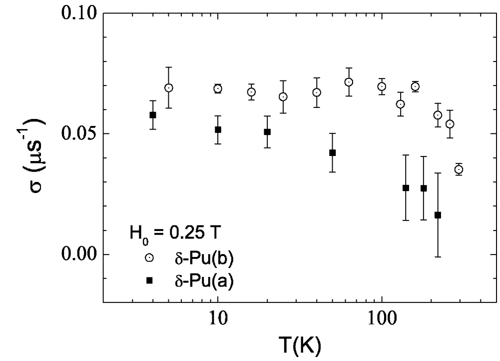

Fig. 2. Temperature dependence of the Gaussian damping rate σ in δ-Pu (a) and δ-Pu (b) in $H_0 = 0.25$ T applied field. The small, relatively temperature-independent magnitude of σ is consistent with no ordered or disordered f-electron spin freezing.

and, thus, μSR is equally sensitive to the *ordered* or *disordered* freezing of the spins.

2. Experimental setup and data analysis

We carried out two sets of measurements in δ-Pu (4.3 at.% Ga). The sample for the first set of measurements in applied field $H_0 = 0$ and 0.25 T was approximately 12 mm in diameter and 0.1 mm thick, consisting of ^{239}Pu (93.7%), with smaller concentrations of ^{240}Pu (5.86%) and ^{238}Pu (0.17%), and a dominant magnetic impurity content of Fe (235 at. ppm) [8]. This sample was annealed for approximately 43 h at 440 °C, and is referred to as δ-Pu (a). The second δ-Pu (4.3 at.% Ga) sample was isotopically identical to the first, with the same impurity concentration, but was annealed for approximately 200 h at 465 °C. This sample, denoted δ-Pu (b), was used for high-field experiments ($H_0 = 2$ T) where muon Knight shift measurements could be performed. The susceptibility for these two samples is shown in Fig. 1, together with the susceptibility for our α-Pu. Data taken on δ-Pu (a) and α-Pu have been published previously [8].

The experiments were performed at the M20 surface muon channel at TRIUMF in Vancouver, Canada. The samples were encapsulated inside a 70 μm thick Kapton coating and were placed inside a Ti cell under He atmosphere to prevent contamination. The cell possessed a thin 50 μm Ti window to allow the muon beam to enter. A negligible fraction of the beam stopped inside the Kapton or Ti window.

In a μ^+SR experiment 100% polarized positive muons are implanted in a sample and come to rest at interstitial sites in the lattice. In our experiments the muon polarization was rotated approximately 90 deg vertically from the incoming muon momentum. The applied field was transverse to the muon spin (TF) and along the beam axis. The muon decays via the weak interaction into a detected positron and two undetected neutrinos with a half-life of 2.2 μs. The time evolution of the muon polarization is monitored by recording the time difference between the muon stop signal and the spatially anisotropic positron decay signal, resulting in a histogram of the muon polarization (or asymmetry) versus time [9]. In a TF experiment one measures the muon precession frequency ν and the damping rate of the precession signal σ, which is a measure of the inhomogeneous field distribution inside the sample.

The μSR data for these TF experiments were well described by the sum of two Gaussian-damped functions, one for Pu $[\exp(-\sigma^2 t^2/2)\cos(2\pi\nu + \phi)]$ and a similar one for Ti. The background signal from the Ti cell was characterized in separate experimental runs without the sample, and the damping rate from this source was held fixed at the measured values (as a function of temperature and field) in the fits to the Pu data [8].

3. Results and discussion

The damping rates σ for measurements in $H_0 = 0.25$ T in δ-Pu (a) and δ-Pu (b) are shown in Fig. 2. As described in Ref. [8], it was established that the muon relaxation was not affected by the buildup of damage caused by the radioactive decay of Pu. The rates in Fig. 2 are comparable to the rates found in zero applied field, where no coherent precession of the muon spin was observed. (Precession would be expected for magnetic order.) If disordered spin freezing occurred one would expect a damping rate proportional to the size of the frozen spin moment. However, the measured values of $\sigma \approx 0.04$–$0.07\ \mu s^{-1}$ in Fig. 2 are relatively small. A typical muon f-electron hyperfine field in actinide systems is about $H_{\rm hyp} \approx 1\,{\rm kOe}/\mu_{\rm B}$, so that a damping rate corresponding to the lower limit for the ordered moment in δ-Pu from neutron scattering (0.04–0.4 $\mu_{\rm B}$) yields $\sigma \approx \gamma_\mu H_{\rm hyp} = 3.4$–$34\ \mu s^{-1}$, orders of magnitude larger than the measured values. Finally, spin freezing of any sort (ordered or disordered) generally produces a damping rate which strongly increases with decreasing temperature. This, too, is not observed, indicating either a very small ordering temperature produced by tiny moments or very weak interatomic exchange [8]; other scenarios are mentioned below.

In higher applied fields one can resolve the Ti and Pu precession signals with sufficient accuracy to yield the muon Knight shift, and, hence, a measure of the local spin susceptibility. The Knight shift is defined as $K = (\nu - \nu_0)/\nu_0$, where ν is the measured frequency and $2\pi\nu_0 = \gamma_\mu H_0$, where γ_μ is the muon's gyromagnetic ratio (8.51×10^8 Hz/T). Generally, $K = K_0 + K_{\rm dem} + H_{\rm hyp}\chi_{\rm f}(T)/N_A\mu_B$, where $K_{\rm dem}$ is the shift caused by the demagnetization fields, $\chi_{\rm f}$ is the temperature-dependent f-electron susceptibility and K_0 is the shift from temperature-independent sources. The constants $N_{\rm A}$ and $\mu_{\rm B}$ are Avogadro's number and the Bohr magneton, respectively. $K_{\rm dem} = 4\pi((1/3) - N)\rho_{\rm mol}\chi$, where $\rho_{\rm mol}$ is the molar density and N is the geometrical demagnetization factor. The latter is about 0.95–0.98 for our samples.