Effect of Radiation Exposure on the Retention of Commercial NAND Flash Memory

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Abstract— We have compared the data retention of irradiated commercial NAND flash memories with that of unirradiated controls. Under some circumstances, radiation exposure has a significant effect on the retention of flash memories.

I. INTRODUCTION

Flash memories are used in different applications in space systems, and our goal was to determine the retention characteristics of flash memories for relevant applications. Retention is defined as the ability to hold information for a specified period, without being refreshed or changed. For terrestrial applications, manufacturers normally specify ten years as the period for retention. In space, one would hope for retention for the entire mission lifetime. The question is whether or not radiation exposure will affect retention during the mission life. Relevant applications include storage of critical program codes, which is rarely, or never, written or rewritten. Mass data storage, on the other hand, may be rewritten frequently, and needs to retain information only until it is downloaded to the ground, or new data is written. Previously, we compared the endurance reliability of irradiated and unirradiated NAND flash memories, and found no significant difference [1]. An endurance failure would have required enough radiation-induced defects in the tunnel oxide to induce a significant shift in $V_T$. However, the unhardened commercial parts used as test samples could be irradiated only to modest doses before they failed for other reasons [2, 3]. It turned out that there would not have been enough radiation-induced defects to cause an endurance failure, until after radiation had caused other failures. There was a concern, however, that retention might be more sensitive to radiation, since a retention failure requires only a very low current leakage path. Such a leakage path requires a very small number of radiation-induced defects, if they are properly aligned. Therefore, we have compared the retention failure rates for irradiated and unirradiated samples, using two different methods to accelerate the aging of the samples. Under certain circumstances, radiation exposure can cause a significant increase in the rate of retention failures in flash memories. We note, however, that flash manufacturers typically specify the endurance and retention characteristics of their products, assuming that error correction software will be used. However, in this test, we did not use error correction, in order to to characterize the underlying technology, and not the effectiveness of the error correction. It is likely that, if we had used error correction, the parts may still have met all their reliability specifications.

II. DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLES

The samples used in this study are summarized in Table I. All devices employ single level cells (SLC). In Table I, the TID (total ionizing dose) failure level was determined previously, by testing to failure [4-6]. The given TID exposure level refers to this experiment, and is less than the failure level. Each device type uses a nominal 3.3 V power supply (2.7-3.6 V, full range). The Samsung parts are intended to operate over the industrial temperature range, -40 to +85°C, while the Micron parts are intended for the commercial temperature range, 0-70°C. Both the write (Programming) and Erase operations proceed through Fowler-Nordheim tunneling of electrons through the tunnel oxide [7]. Fowler-Nordheim (F-N) injection requires very high fields, and the operation of this work was supported in part by the NASA Electronic Parts and Packaging Program (NEPP), and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) under IACRO# 11-43951.

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III. EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

SLC NAND flash normally has a specification to retain stored information for ten years. To accelerate the aging of the parts to simulate a ten year lifetime, we have used two different methods. The first industry standard technique for accelerating retention failures is to bake the parts at high temperature, in order to investigate retention for program code storage. We used this method, baking both the Samsung 8G parts and the Micron 16G parts at 100°C, for at least 1000 hours. Characterization of the baked test devices was performed using a commercial Triad Memory Tester system [9]. For the Samsung parts, five parts were tested in each test group—that is, five parts were irradiated to 200 krad (SiO₂), and five matching controls remained unirradiated. This radiation dose was chosen because the parts survived to 400 krad (SiO₂) when tested to failure, and half that is well above most NASA requirements. The Micron 16G parts were handled similarly, except that the radiation dose was chosen to be 50 krad (SiO₂). In a test to failure, the Micron 16G parts failed at 100 krad (SiO₂), and 50 krad (SiO₂) also matched the dose to another group of Micron parts that had been subject to P/E cycling. Both groups were prepared in the same way, with a checkerboard pattern written, and initial electrical tests performed. During baking, both groups were read out periodically, and the errors counted. The second method employed simulating Mass Storage issues, was performing (P/E) cycling on five irradiated samples and five unirradiated controls of the Micron 8G NAND (see Table I) to three different cycling levels. These levels were 10⁷, 10⁸, and 10⁹ P/E cycles. The radiation exposure was to 50 krad (SiO₂). This level was chosen because it was the highest dose where all the parts had survived in a test to failure, which occurred at 75 krad (SiO₂). The cycled parts were characterized [10]. For parts that are cycled in normal operation, this is an obvious technique, and an industry standard, for accelerating the aging process [8, 9].

TID testing was done at a Co-60 room air source, where the pencils are raised up out of the floor, during exposures. Active dosimetry was performed, using air ionization probes. Testing was done, using a standard Pb/Al filter box. The initial tests were done in accordance with MIL-STD-TM 1019.7 [11]. Parts were under DC bias during exposure. Each test group of five devices was programmed with an all zero pattern during exposures, and biased at 3.6 V.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are extensive literatures on the reliability, including retention characteristics, of flash memory (see, for example, [7] and its bibliography). Generally, the physical mechanism that causes retention failure is leakage current through the tunnel oxide [12], which is due to trap-assisted tunneling (TAT) [13]. Basically, electrons from the floating gate tunnel from trap to trap until they escape the oxide. The tunneling rate is a strong function of the distance between traps, and it has been argued that even two defects, properly aligned, can cause a retention failure [13]. The electrical stress from P/E cycling, which injects charge through the tunnel oxide at high field, causes oxide damage in the form of hole traps, and gives rise to SILC (stress-induced leakage current). Since the effect of TID exposure is also to introduce trapped holes into the oxide, one might expect radiation-induced trapped holes to contribute to TAT-induced retention failures. It has been shown [14-16] that electrons tunneling into and out of E' centers, which are just trapped holes, is an important component in the time-dependent response of MOS oxides. There is also no question that high enough radiation doses will produce measurable leakage currents in thin MOS oxides [8], even without electrical stress. In [8], Scarpa et al. reported measurable radiation-induced leakage currents (RILC), but at multi-Mrad (SiO₂) doses. In fact, Scarpa et al. also concluded that RILC and SILC originate in the same physical mechanism. At such high doses, unhardened commercial technology would be likely to fail from TID damage long before RILC could be measured. On the other hand, retention failures can be caused by leakage currents too small to measure directly.

James [17] reverse engineered flash products from several manufacturers, and reported that the Samsung 4G single level cell (SLC) memory cell was 73 nm by 90 nm, with a tunnel oxide thickness of 7.2 nm. If we assume a ΔV of 1 V is required to produce a retention failure, which is typical, then, for this geometry, the loss of 194 electrons will cause a failure. For the typical ten year retention spec, this means leakage current has to be less than one electron every 19 days, or less than 10⁻²⁵ A, on average. For newer chips, scaled more aggressively, the tolerable leakage current would be even less. Therefore, the question is not whether or not radiation can cause flash retention failures. The question is what dose level is required for such failures to occur. And will unhardened commercial parts suffer TID failures for other reasons before that dose is reached?

As we have described, there are two methods used to accelerate retention failures in flash memory, which are to bake the circuit at elevated temperature, or to expose the circuit to repeated P/E cycles [8, 9]. Here, we have used both methods, as have many others, some of whom treat the two methods as interchangeable. In fact, Belgal et al. [18] present a model which allows one to calculate how many P/E cycles are equivalent to a given change in the bake temperature. This model is given with supporting experimental data, but only for
the authors’ company’s process (Intel), and the general applicability is uncertain. It is not entirely clear what the mechanism is by which a high temperature bake accelerates charge loss from the floating gate. One possibility, suggested by Herrmann et al., [19] is a multi-phonon assisted tunneling process, by which electrons in the floating gate tunnel to oxide traps.

The aging acceleration factor (AF) that one gains by baking at 100°C, rather than 25°C, is not entirely clear. Normally, AF(T) is calculated as follows:

\[
AF(T) = \exp\left(\frac{E_A}{k_B} \left(\frac{1}{T_{use}} - \frac{1}{T_{stress}}\right)\right)
\]  

(1)

where \(E_A\) is the activation energy, \(k_B\) is the Boltzman constant, \(T_{stress}\) is the bake temperature, 100°C, and \(T_{use}\) is taken to be room temperature. The problem here is that published values of \(E_A\) vary widely, from 0.3 eV to 1.9 eV, and that \(E_A\) appears to be temperature dependent [20]. Generally, the higher values of \(E_A\) correspond to higher temperatures than we used here. If we use Eq. 1 with \(E_A = 0.3\) eV, then AF = 8.7, and 1000 hours at the stress temperature corresponds to about one year at room temperature. If \(E_A = 0.5\) eV is assumed, AF = 36.8, and 1000 hours test time corresponds to about 4.2 years. If \(E_A = 0.7\) eV is assumed, AF = 155, and 1000 hours corresponds to 17.8 years. It is not clear what the proper value of \(E_A\) is, but relatively low values are usually assumed in the literature [15, 17] for our temperature range. Therefore, 1000 hours of test time may not be enough to predict a full ten year lifetime.

In Fig. 1, we show the results for the Samsung parts, baked at 100°C, for almost 1200 hours. This temperature was selected because we wanted to keep the temperature low enough to not anneal out the radiation-induced defects we were trying to study. In addition, in [15], the authors presented data showing that the acceleration of the aging process saturated above this temperature. The five irradiated parts have from 96 to 197 errors, while none of the unirradiated controls have more than four errors. Therefore, we conclude there is clear evidence that the radiation dose has caused an increase in the number of bits suffering retention failures.

In Fig. 2, we show similar results for the Micron 16G parts, which were also baked at 100°C. The irradiated samples all have more than 300 errors, and the unirradiated samples all have fewer than 275 errors. We will discuss the details of the statistical analysis later, but the difference is statistically significant at the \(p = 0.95\) level. That is, for both manufacturers, there is a statistically significant effect on retention properties from radiation exposure in a high temperature bake test.

For the Micron parts, that were cycled rather than baked, the results are less clear. For example, the irradiated group cycled to \(10^5\) P/E cycles, the mean error count for the five parts was 41, with a standard deviation of 25. For the unirradiated controls, the mean error count was 24, with a

![Fig. 1. Error count for retention failures in Samsung 8G NAND flash, after baking at 100°C for more than 1000 hours. DUTs 2-6 were irradiated to 200 krad (SiO2); DUTs 7, 8, 9, 12, and 18 were unirradiated.](image1)

![Fig. 2. Errors from retention failures for Micron 16G parts, baked at 100°C. DUTs 11-15 were irradiated to 50 krad (SiO2); DUTs 16-20 are unirradiated controls.](image2)
Fig. 3. Error counts for five Micron 8G samples, irradiated to 50 krad (SiO$_2$), then cycled to 105 P/E cycles, and monitored for at room temperature.

Fig. 4. Error counts for Micron 8G unirradiated controls, cycled to 105 P/E cycles.

Fig. 5. Error counts for Micron 8G samples, exposed to 50 krad (SiO$_2$) and 104 P/E cycles.

Fig. 6. Error counts for Micron 8G samples, unirradiated controls at 104 P/E cycles.

Fig. 7. Error counts for Micron 8G irradiated samples, with one P/E cycle.

Fig. 8. Error counts for Micron 8G unirradiated controls, with one P/E cycle.

Next, we present statistical analysis, which supports the conclusion that the results for the parts baked at 100°C are statistically significant. In Table 2, we show the error counts for all the samples, along with the calculation of the mean ($\mu$), the variance ($\sigma^2$), and the standard deviation ($\sigma$). Table 3 is similar to Table 2, but for the Micron 16G parts, which were also baked at 100°C. Table 4 is similar to Tables 2 and 3, for the Micron 8G parts cycled at to $10^5$ P/E cycles.

We have applied the Student’s t-test [21] to determine whether the difference between the test group (irradiated) and the control group (unirradiated) is significant, or not.

|TABLE 2. DATA FOR SAMSUNG PARTS BAKED AT 100°C, WITH CALCULATIONS OF MEAN, VARIANCE ($\sigma^2$), AND STANDARD DEVIATION ($\sigma$).|
|---|---|---|---|---|
|Sample| No TID| Errors| x-μ| (x-μ)$^2$| Errors| x-μ| (x-μ)$^2$|
|1| OUT1| 2| -0.4| .16| 145| -2.6| 6.8|
|2| OUT1| 1| 0.6| .36| 180| 32.4| 1050|
|3| OUT1| 1| 0.6| .36| 96| -51.6| 2663|
|4| OUT1| 2| -0.4| .16| 197| 49.4| 2440|
|5| OUT1| 2| -0.4| .16| 120| -27.6| 762|
|Total| OUT1| 8| 0| 1.2| 738| 0| 6922|
|Mean| OUT1| 1.6| | | 147.6| |
|σ$^2$| OUT1| 0.3| | | 1730| |
|σ| OUT1| 0.54| | | 41.6| |
Actually, there is about one chance in four the results are due to chance. As indicated in Fig. 9, the two tests where the parts were baked both have \( t \) greater than this value of \( tcrit \). For the Micron 16G parts, \( t = 2.61 \), which exceeds \( tcrit \) at the level of \( p = 0.05 \). However the result is not significant with 99 \% of confidence. For this reason, the results presented here are not statistically significant with confidence levels.

The second point concerns the difference between the high temperature baking results, and the results on P/E cycled parts. Both radiation and P/E cycling introduce trapped holes into the tunnel oxide. One would expect that the effect of radiation-induced hole traps would be harder to resolve, when another known physical process is also introducing hole traps. This is especially true when the dose is relatively low to begin with. At higher doses, the radiation effect would probably have become statistically significant in the cycling process.

\( \sigma \)

### Table 4. Error Data for Micron 8G Parts Baked to 50 Krad (SiO\(_2\)), with Calculations of Mean, Variance, and Standard Deviation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>x-μ</th>
<th>(x-μ)(^2)</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>x-μ</th>
<th>(x-μ)(^2)</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>125.44</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-21</td>
<td>441</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>49</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>44</td>
<td>1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-13.8</td>
<td>190.44</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>-9</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-13.8</td>
<td>190.44</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>-11</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \sigma )</td>
<td>304.7</td>
<td>647</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \sigma )</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>25.4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The point of the cycling experiments reported here is to determine if flash memory in, say, a solid state recorder (SSR) could have survived 200 krad (SiO\(_2\)), the radiation effect would have been even clearer at the higher dose. The point of the cycling experiments reported here is to determine if flash memory in, say, a solid state recorder (SSR) could have survived 200 krad (SiO\(_2\)), the radiation effect would have been even clearer at the higher dose.

### V. Conclusion

There are three points to be made about the results presented here. First, any radiation effect will have a clear dependence on the dose level. For the two cases of high temperature baking, both were statistically significant, but the Samsung results were significant to a much higher confidence level than the Micron results. However, the Samsung dose was also 4X greater. One would think that, if the Micron parts could have survived 200 krad (SiO\(_2\)), the radiation effect would have become statistically significant in the cycling process.
specifications of the manufacturers assume error correction whether these effects will have major system impacts, or not. Circumstances are complicated enough, that it is not clear to induce physical processes that cause measurable reliability errors. This point should be addressed through further testing. We have obtained clear evidence that radiation exposure can errors. This point should be addressed through further testing. We have obtained clear evidence that radiation exposure can induce physical processes that cause measurable reliability effects, under some circumstances. However, the circumstances are complicated enough, that it is not clear whether these effects will have major system impacts, or not.

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