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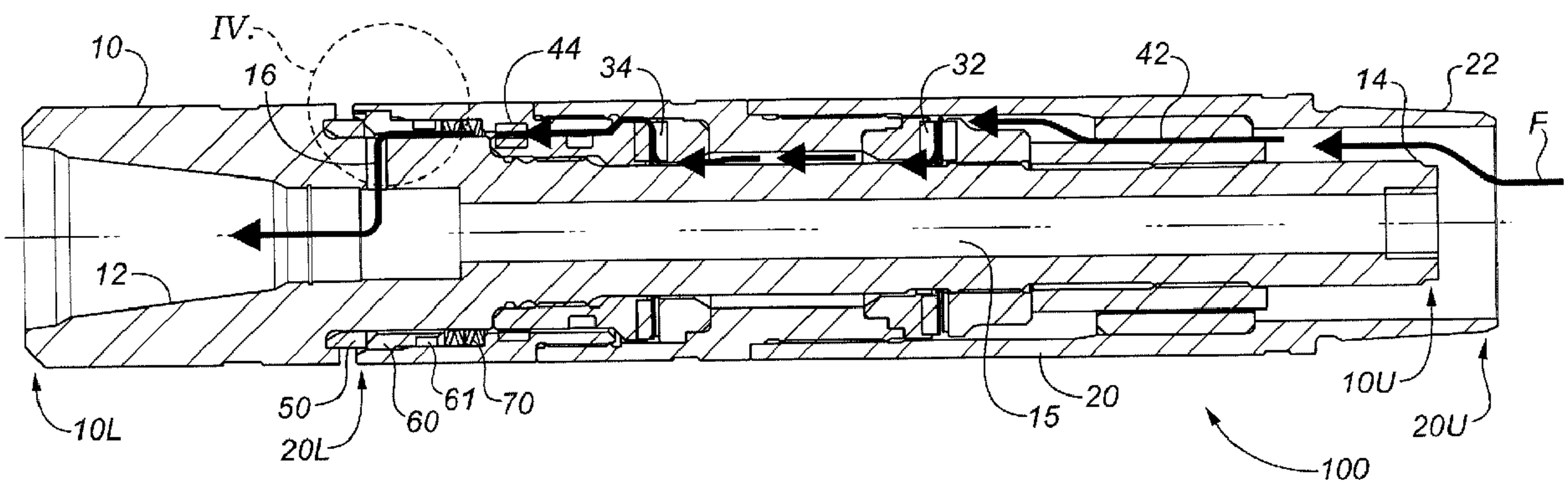
(54) **Titre : ENSEMBLE PALIER LUBRIFIE A L'AIDE DE BOUE AVEC JOINT D'ETANCHEITE MECANIQUE**

(54) **Title: MUD-LUBRICATED BEARING ASSEMBLY WITH MECHANICAL SEAL**



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

In a mud-lubricated bearing assembly for a downhole motor, a mechanical seal is provided between the mandrel and the lower end of the bearing housing to prevent discharge of drilling fluid (mud) from the bearing assembly into the wellbore annulus. The mechanical seal is effected by mating wear-resistant annular contact surfaces provided on the mandrel and the bearing housing, with biasing means preferably being provided to keep the contact surfaces in sealing engagement during both on- bottom and off-bottom operational modes. The diverted drilling fluid passing through the bearings is redirected into the bore of the mandrel via ports through the mandrel wall to rejoin the main flow to the drill bit, such that substantially all of the drilling fluid flows through the bit.

ABSTRACT

In a mud-lubricated bearing assembly for a downhole motor, a mechanical seal is provided between the mandrel and the lower end of the bearing housing to prevent discharge of drilling fluid (mud) from the bearing assembly into the wellbore annulus. The mechanical seal is effected by mating wear-resistant annular contact surfaces provided on the mandrel and the bearing housing, with biasing means preferably being provided to keep the contact surfaces in sealing engagement during both on-bottom and off-bottom operational modes. The diverted drilling fluid passing through the bearings is redirected into the bore of the mandrel via ports through the mandrel wall to rejoin the main flow to the drill bit, such that substantially all of the drilling fluid flows through the bit.

MUD-LUBRICATED BEARING ASSEMBLY WITH MECHANICAL SEAL

FIELD OF THE DISCLOSURE

The present disclosure relates in general to bearing assemblies for downhole motors used in drilling oil, gas, and water wells, and in particular to mud-lubricated bearing sections in downhole motors.

BACKGROUND

In drilling a wellbore into the earth, such as for the recovery of hydrocarbons or minerals from a subsurface formation, it is conventional practice to connect a drill bit onto the lower end of a drill string (comprising drill pipe sections connected end-to-end) and then to rotate the drill string (by means of either a "rotary table" or a "top drive" associated with a drilling rig) so that the drill bit progresses downward into the earth to create the desired wellbore.

During the drilling process, a drilling fluid (commonly referred to as "drilling mud", or simply "mud") is pumped under pressure downward through the drill string, out the drill bit into the wellbore, and then upward back to the surface through the wellbore annulus between the drill string and the wellbore. The drilling fluid, which may be water-based or oil-based, is typically viscous to enhance its ability to carry wellbore cuttings to the surface. The drilling fluid can perform various other valuable functions, including enhancement of drill bit performance (e.g., by ejection of fluid under pressure through ports in the drill bit, creating mud jets that blast into and weaken the underlying formation in advance of the drill bit), drill bit cooling, and formation of a protective cake on the wellbore wall (to stabilize and seal the wellbore wall). To optimize these functions, it is desirable for as much of the drilling fluid as possible to reach the drill bit.

Particularly since the mid-1980s, it has become increasingly common and desirable in the oil and gas industry to use "directional drilling" techniques to drill horizontal and other non-vertical wellbores, to facilitate more efficient access to, and production from, larger regions of hydrocarbon-bearing formations than would be possible using only vertical wellbores. In directional drilling, specialized drill string components and "bottomhole assemblies" (BHAs) are used to induce, monitor, and control deviations in the path of the drill bit, so as to produce a wellbore of desired non-vertical configuration.

Directional drilling is typically carried out using a "downhole motor" (also referred to as a "mud motor") incorporated into the drill string immediately above the drill bit. A typical mud motor includes the following primary components (in order, starting from the top of the motor assembly):

- a top sub adapted to facilitate connection to the lower end of a drill string ("sub" being the common general term in the oil and gas industry for any small or secondary drill string component);
- a power section (commonly comprising a positive displacement motor of well-known type, with a helically-vaned rotor eccentrically rotatable within a stator section, and with a fixed or adjustable straight or bent housing for inducing a wellbore deviation);
- a drive shaft enclosed within a drive shaft housing having a central bore for conveying drilling fluid to the drill bit, with the upper end of the drive shaft being operably connected to the rotor of the power section; and
- a bearing section comprising a cylindrical mandrel coaxially and rotatably disposed within a cylindrical bearing housing, with an upper end coupled to the lower end of the drive shaft, and a lower end connectable to a drill bit.

In drilling processes using a mud motor, drilling fluid is circulated under pressure through the drill string and back up to the surface as in conventional drilling methods. However, the pressurized drilling fluid is diverted through the power section of the mud motor to generate power to rotate the drill bit.

The bearing section must permit relative rotation between the mandrel and the housing, while also transferring axial thrust loads between the mandrel and the housing. Axial thrust loads arise in two drilling operational modes: "on-bottom" loading, and "off-bottom" loading. On-bottom loading corresponds to the operational mode during which the drill bit is boring into a subsurface formation under vertical load from the weight of the drill string, which in turn is in compression; in other words, the drill bit is on the bottom of the borehole. Off-bottom loading corresponds to operational modes during which the drill bit is raised off the bottom of the borehole and the drill string is in tension (i.e., when the bit is off the bottom of the borehole and is hanging from the drill string, such as when the drill string is being "tripped" out of the wellbore, or when the wellbore is being reamed in the uphole direction). Tension loads across the bearing section housing and mandrel are also induced when drilling fluid is being circulated while the drill bit is off bottom, due to the pressure drop across the drill bit and bearing assembly

Accordingly, the bearing section of a mud motor must be capable of withstanding thrust loads in both axial directions, with the mandrel rotating inside the bearing housing. Suitable radial bearings are used to maintain coaxial alignment between the mandrel and the bearing housing.

Thrust bearings contained within the bearing section of a mud motor may be either oil-lubricated or mud-lubricated. In an oil-lubricated bearing assembly, the thrust bearings are disposed within a sealed, oil-filled reservoir to provide a clean operating environment. The oil reservoir is located within an annular region between the mandrel and the bearing housing, with the reservoir being defined by the inner surface of the housing and the outer surface of the mandrel, and by sealing elements at the upper and lower ends of the reservoir.

Mud-lubricated bearing assemblies comprise bearings (thrust bearings and/or radial bearings) that are designed for operation in drilling fluid. In conventional mud-lubricated bearings, a portion of the drilling fluid flowing to the drill bit is diverted through the bearings to provide lubrication and cooling, and then is discharged into the wellbore annulus, thus bypassing the bit. This reduces the volume of drilling fluid flowing through the bit, thus reducing the hydraulic energy available for hole cleaning and bit performance.

BRIEF SUMMARY

The present disclosure teaches a mud-lubricated bearing assembly providing a mechanical seal between the mandrel and the lower end of the bearing housing to prevent discharge of drilling fluid from the bearing assembly into the wellbore annulus. The mechanical seal is effected by mating wear-resistant annular contact surfaces provided on the mandrel and the bearing housing, with biasing means preferably being provided to keep the contact surfaces in substantially sealing engagement during both on-bottom and off-bottom operational modes. The diverted drilling fluid passing through the bearings is redirected into the bore of the mandrel (via ports through the mandrel wall) so as to rejoin the main flow through the bit, such that substantially all of the drilling fluid flows through the bit. Preferred embodiments use a combination of hard-faced radial and thrust bearings in a configuration that results in the bearing assembly being substantially shorter than conventional bearing assemblies.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Embodiments in accordance with the present disclosure will now be described with reference to the accompanying figures, in which numerical references denote like parts, and in which:

FIGURE 1 is a longitudinal section through a first embodiment of a bearing assembly in accordance with the present disclosure.

FIGURE 2 is an enlarged sectional detail of the upper and lower seal rings of the bearing assembly in FIG. 1.

FIGURE 3 is a longitudinal section as in FIG. 1, illustrating the fluid flow path through the bearing assembly.

FIGURE 4 is an enlarged sectional detail as in FIG. 2, illustrating the fluid flow path from the annulus between the mandrel and the bearing housing into the mandrel bore.

FIGURE 5 is a longitudinal section through a second embodiment of a bearing assembly in accordance with the present disclosure, incorporating a flow-restricting nozzle disposed in a lower region of the mandrel bore.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. 1 illustrates one embodiment of a mud motor bearing assembly **100** in accordance with the present disclosure. Bearing assembly **100** comprises a generally cylindrical mandrel **10** which is rotatable within a generally cylindrical housing **20**. The lower end **10L** of mandrel **10** has a threaded connection **12** for connection to the drill bit or other BHA components below the motor, and the upper end **10U** of mandrel **10** comprises a threaded connection **14** for connection to the driveshaft assembly and rotor of the power section (not shown). Mandrel **10** has a longitudinal channel or bore **15** for conveying drilling fluid to the drill bit. The upper end **20U** of housing **20** comprises a threaded connection **22** for connection to the fixed or adjustable straight or bent housing and stator of the power section.

Bearing assembly **100** comprises multiple bearings for transferring the various axial and radial loads between mandrel **10** and housing **20** that occur during the drilling process. An upper thrust bearing **32** and a lower thrust bearing **34** transfer off-bottom and on-bottom operating loads, respectively, while an upper radial bearing **42** and a lower radial bearing **44** transfer radial loads between mandrel **10** and housing **20**.

As shown in enlarged detail in FIG. 2, bearing assembly **100** further comprises an annular lower seal ring **50** axially and non-rotatably secured to mandrel **10** in a region adjacent to lower end **20L** of housing **20**, plus a "floating" annular upper seal ring **60** mounted to a lower region of housing **20** such that upper seal ring **60** is non-rotatable relative to housing **20** but is axially movable relative to housing **20** within a defined range of travel.

For optimal operational effectiveness, bearing assembly **100** preferably includes seal means for sealing between upper seal ring **60** and the adjacent inner cylindrical surface of housing **20**. The seal means can be of any suitable type, such as (by way of non-limiting example) an elastomeric O-ring disposed within an annular seal groove **61** formed in an outer surface of upper seal ring **60** as shown in FIG. 2.

Lower seal ring **50** has a wear-resistant annular upper seal surface **54** in a plane perpendicularly transverse to the longitudinal axis of the mandrel, and upper seal ring **60** has a wear-resistant annular lower seal surface **64** matingly engageable with upper seal surface **54** on lower seal ring **50** so as to prevent leakage of drilling fluid across the interface **55** between seal surfaces **54** and **64** except in miniscule amounts if any. Persons skilled in the art will be aware of various materials that can be used for fabrication or hard-facing of seal rings **50** and **60** to provide seal surfaces **54** and **64** with wear resistance to suit specific requirements, and embodiments in accordance with the present disclosure are not limited or restricted to the use of any particular means or materials for providing wear resistance on seal surfaces **54** and **64**.

Mandrel **10** is provided with one or more fluid ports **16** extending between bore **15** of mandrel **10** and the outer surface of mandrel **10** adjacent to upper seal ring **60**. Because flow across seal interface **55** is substantially prevented, drilling fluid diverted through the bearings will be directed through fluid ports **16** into mandrel bore **15** to join the main flow of fluid to the drill bit. For this purpose, fluid must be able to flow downward through or past upper seal ring **60** in order to reach fluid ports **16**. In the illustrated embodiment, and as best seen in FIG. 2, this can be facilitated by sizing upper seal ring **60** to provide an annular space **66** between the inner surface of upper seal ring **60** and the outer surface of mandrel **10**. However, bearing assemblies in accordance with the present disclosure are not limited to this particular arrangement, and persons skilled in the art will understand that fluid flow to ports **16** can be effected or facilitated in a variety of other ways. By way of non-limiting alternative example, upper seal ring **60** could be made to fit fairly closely around mandrel **10** while including one or more longitudinal grooves or channels allowing flow through seal ring **60**.

Lower seal ring **50** may be non-rotatably secured to mandrel **10** by any suitable means, such as (to provide one non-limiting example) by way of an interference fit at a cylindrical interface **52** with mandrel **10** as shown in FIG. 2.

Similarly, bearing assemblies in accordance with the present disclosure are not limited or restricted to any particular means for non-rotatably securing floating upper seal ring **60** to housing **20** or for permitting longitudinal movement of upper seal ring **60** relative to housing **20**. However, FIG. 2 illustrates one non-limiting example of means for providing these features. In the illustrated embodiment, upper seal ring **60** is formed with one or more axially-oriented splines **62** slidable within mating grooves **25** formed in housing **20**.

During operation of a mud motor incorporating bearing assembly **100**, mandrel **10** will rotate relative to housing **20**, so lower seal ring **50** will rotate relative to floating upper seal ring **60**. In the typical case, there will be limited axial travel between mandrel **10** and housing **20** as the configuration of bearing assembly **100** changes from on-bottom to off-bottom loading conditions or vice versa. FIG. 2 illustrates the operational case in which bearing assembly **100** is under on-bottom loading, with a gap $\mathbf{G_1}$ being formed between lower end **20L** of housing **20** and the adjacent portion of mandrel **10**. When bearing assembly **100** is under off-bottom loading, a slightly larger gap $\mathbf{G_2}$ will be formed between lower end **20L** of housing **20** and mandrel **10** as splines **62** on upper seal ring **60** slide downward within grooves **25** in housing **20**.

Preferably, upper and lower seal surfaces **54** and **64** will at all times remain matingly engaged to prevent fluid leakage across interface **55**, by virtue of biasing means provided for biasing floating upper seal ring **60** toward fixed lower seal ring **50**. Such biasing means may be provided in the form of springs **70** as shown in the Figures. Springs **70** are illustrated in the Figures in the form of a “stack” of Belleville washers. However, this is by way of non-limiting example only, and any suitable alternative biasing means (such as one or more helical springs) may be used without departing from the scope of the disclosure. In addition, differential pressure across the seal means disposed in seal groove **61** will also bias upper seal ring **60** toward lower seal ring **50**.

During operation of the mud motor, a portion of the circulating drilling fluid is diverted through the bearings to lubricate and cool bearings **32**, **34**, **42**, and **44** (in the illustrated embodiment). This diverted fluid continues to flow past the bearings until reaching interface **55** between seal faces **54** and **64** of seal rings **50** and **60**, respectively. Preferably, seal faces **54** and **64** will be highly polished to minimize leakage of drilling fluid across interface **55** between seal rings **50** and **60**, such that all or substantially all of the fluid exiting the bearings is redirected through ports **16** in mandrel **10** to join the main flow of fluid in mandrel bore **15** and to proceed onward toward the bit. This fluid flow path is illustrated by flow arrows **F** in FIGS. 3 and 4.

FIG. 5 illustrates a variant bearing assembly **110** generally similar to bearing assembly **100** but in which a nozzle **120** is provided near lower end **10L** of mandrel **10** above fluid ports **16**, to create a pressure drop across the bearing assembly to force the flow of drilling fluid through the bearings. In embodiments not incorporating nozzle **120**, other means may be provided to help ensure adequate fluid flow through the bearings. To provide one non-limiting example of such means, in embodiments in which upper radial bearing **42** is provided in the form of a bushing-type bearing, upper radial bearing **42** could be provided with longitudinally-oriented grooves or channels to facilitate adequate fluid flow. Another alternative would be to provide radial ports through the wall of mandrel **10** into mandrel bore **15** at a point between upper thrust bearing **32** and upper radial bearing **42**.

It will be readily appreciated by those skilled in the art that various modifications to embodiments in accordance with the present disclosure may be devised without departing from the scope of the present teachings, including modifications which may use equivalent structures or materials hereafter conceived or developed. It is to be especially understood that the scope of the claims appended hereto should not be limited by any particular embodiments described and illustrated herein, but should be given the broadest interpretation consistent with the description as a whole. It is also to be understood that the substitution of a variant of a claimed or illustrated element or feature, without any substantial resultant change in functionality, will not constitute a departure from the scope of the claims.

In this patent document, any form of the word “comprise” is to be understood in its non-limiting sense to mean that any item following such word is included, but items not specifically mentioned are not excluded. A reference to an element by the indefinite article "a" does not preclude the presence or inclusion of more than one such element, unless the context clearly requires that there be one and only one such element. Any use of any form of the terms "connect", "engage", "couple", "attach", “secure”, or any other term describing an interaction between elements is not meant to limit the interaction to direct interaction between the subject elements, and may also include indirect interaction between the elements such as through secondary or intermediary structure.

As used herein, relational terms such as but not limited to “coaxial” and “perpendicular” are not intended to denote or require absolute mathematical or geometrical precision. Accordingly, such terms are to be understood as denoting or requiring substantial precision only (e.g., “substantially coaxial”) unless the context clearly requires otherwise. Wherever used in this document, the terms “typical” and “typically” are to be interpreted in the sense of representative of common usage or practice, and are not to be understood as implying essentiality or invariability.

THE EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION IN WHICH AN EXCLUSIVE PROPERTY OR PRIVILEGE IS CLAIMED ARE DEFINED AS FOLLOWS:

1. A mud-lubricated bearing assembly comprising:

(a) a generally cylindrical housing;

(b) an elongate mandrel having a longitudinal bore, wherein the mandrel is coaxially disposed within the housing and is rotatable relative to the housing;

(c) a thrust bearing configured to transfer axial on-bottom loads and off-bottom loads from the mandrel to the housing;

(d) a radial bearing disposed within an annular space between the mandrel and the housing, wherein the radial bearing is configured to maintain coaxial alignment of the mandrel and the housing;

(e) an annular lower seal ring coaxially and non-rotatably secured to a lower region of the mandrel, wherein the lower seal ring includes an annular upper seal surface; and

(f) an annular upper seal ring mounted to a lower region of the housing, wherein the upper seal ring is non-rotatable relative to the housing, and wherein the upper seal ring includes an annular lower seal surface matingly engageable with the upper seal surface of the lower seal ring;

wherein the mandrel includes one or more fluid ports configured to allow fluid flow into the bore of the mandrel from the annular space between the mandrel and the housing.

2. The bearing assembly of Claim 1, further comprising biasing means for maintaining said upper and lower seal surfaces in mating engagement.

3. The bearing assembly of Claim 2, wherein the biasing means comprises a spring.

4. The bearing assembly of Claim 3, wherein the spring is disposed above the upper seal ring in the annular space between the mandrel and the housing.

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5. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 1-4, further comprising a seal assembly for sealing between the upper seal ring and the housing.

6. The bearing assembly of Claim 5, wherein the seal assembly comprises an O-ring disposed within an annular seal groove in an outer surface of the upper seal ring.

7. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 1-6, wherein non-rotatability of the lower seal ring relative to the mandrel is provided by an interference fit between the lower seal ring and the mandrel.

8. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 1-7, wherein non-rotatable axial movability of the upper seal ring relative to the housing is provided by a plurality of axially-oriented splines on the upper seal ring that slidably engages a plurality of mating grooves on the housing.

9. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 1-8, wherein the upper seal surface on the lower seal ring and the lower seal surface of the upper seal ring are wear-resistant.

10. The bearing assembly of Claim 9, wherein the upper and lower seal surfaces are provided with wear resistance by hard facing.

11. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 1-10, wherein the upper seal surface on the lower seal ring and the lower seal surface of the upper seal ring are polished.

12. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 1-11, further comprising means for providing a pressure drop across the bearing assembly.

13. The bearing assembly of Claim 12, wherein the means for providing a pressure drop comprises a flow-restricting nozzle disposed in a lower region of the mandrel bore.

14. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 1-13, wherein the upper seal ring is axially movable relative to the housing within a defined range of travel.

15. The bearing assembly of Claim 1-14, wherein the annular upper seal surface of the lower seal ring is disposed in a plane perpendicularly transverse to the longitudinal axis of the mandrel.

16. A mud-lubricated bearing assembly comprising:

(a) an outer housing;

(b) an elongate mandrel coaxially disposed within the outer housing, wherein the mandrel includes a longitudinal bore and is configured to rotate relative to the outer housing;

(c) a thrust bearing disposed in an annular space between the mandrel and the outer housing, wherein the thrust bearing is configured to transfer axial on-bottom loads and off-bottom loads from the mandrel to the housing;

(d) a radial bearing disposed within the annular space, wherein the radial bearing is configured to maintain coaxial alignment of the mandrel and the outer housing;

(e) a first seal ring disposed about the mandrel, wherein the first seal ring is non-rotatably coupled to the mandrel and includes an annular seal surface; and

(f) a second seal ring disposed about the mandrel, wherein the second seal ring is non-rotatably coupled to the outer housing and includes an annular seal surface that matingly engages the annular seal surface of the first seal ring;

wherein the mandrel includes a fluid port extending radially from the annular space to the bore of the mandrel.

17. The bearing assembly of Claim 16, wherein the second seal ring is axially movable relative to the outer housing.

18. The bearing assembly of Claim 17, wherein the second seal ring is axially movable relative to the outer housing within a defined range of travel.

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19. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 16-18, wherein the first seal ring is positioned axially below the second seal ring.

20. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 16-19, further comprising biasing means disposed in the annular space, wherein the second seal ring is axially positioned between the biasing means and the first seal ring, and wherein the biasing means is configured to urge the annular seal surface of the second seal ring into engagement with the annular seal surface of the first seal ring.

21. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 16-20, further comprising an annular seal assembly radially positioned between the second seal ring and the housing.

22. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 16-21, wherein the first seal ring is non-rotatably coupled to the mandrel with an interference fit.

23. The bearing assembly of any one of Claims 16-22, wherein the second seal ring is coupled to the outer housing with a plurality of axially-oriented splines on the second seal ring that slidably engage a plurality of mating grooves on the outer housing.

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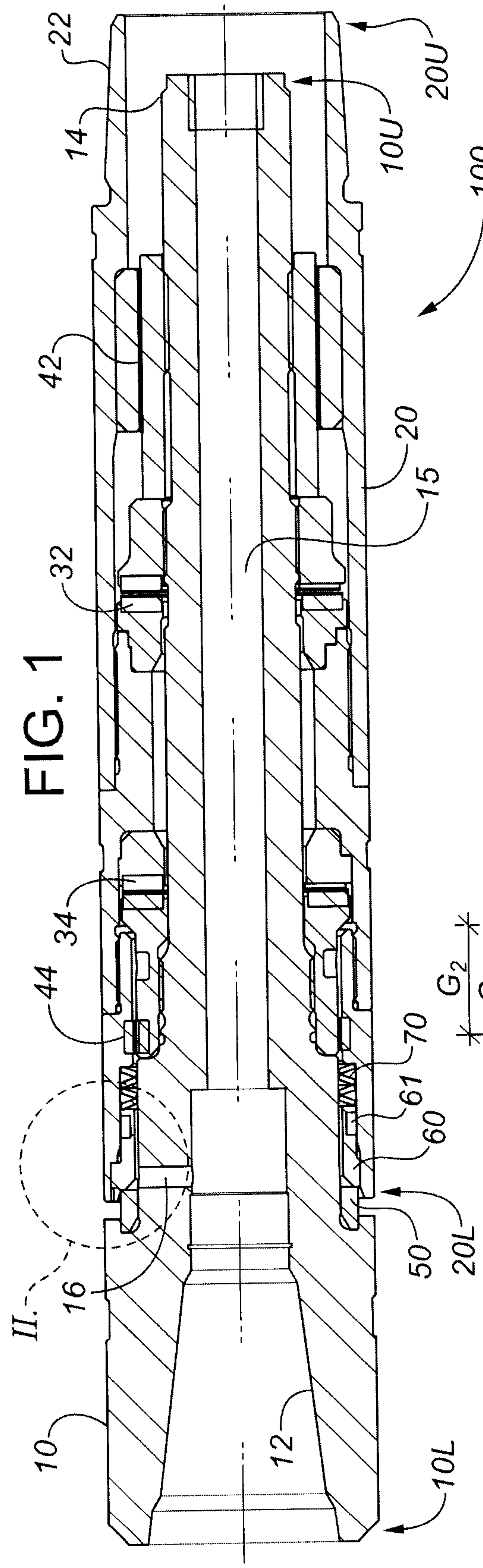
22
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14
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16
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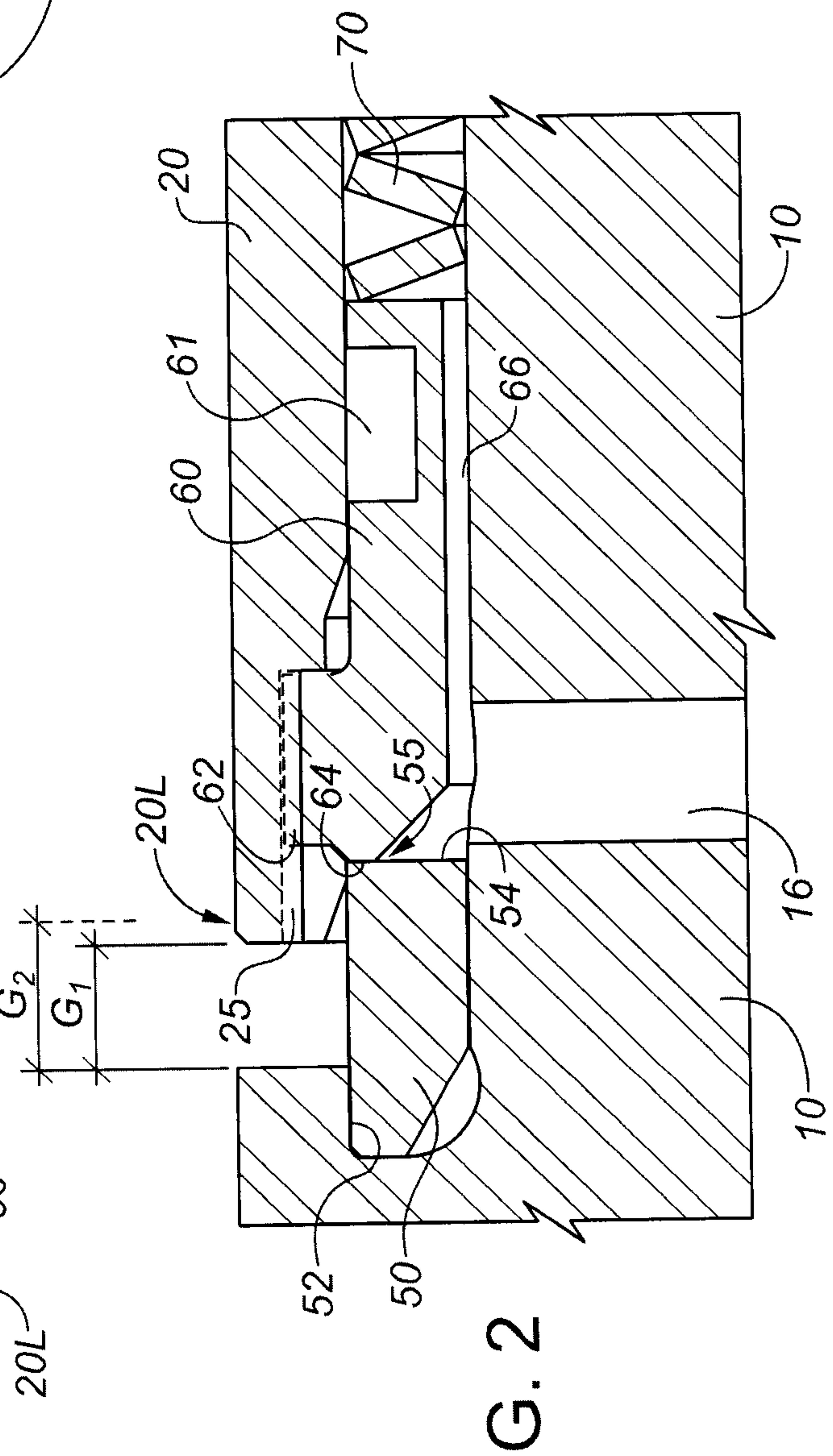
10
12
10L

FIG. 1


70
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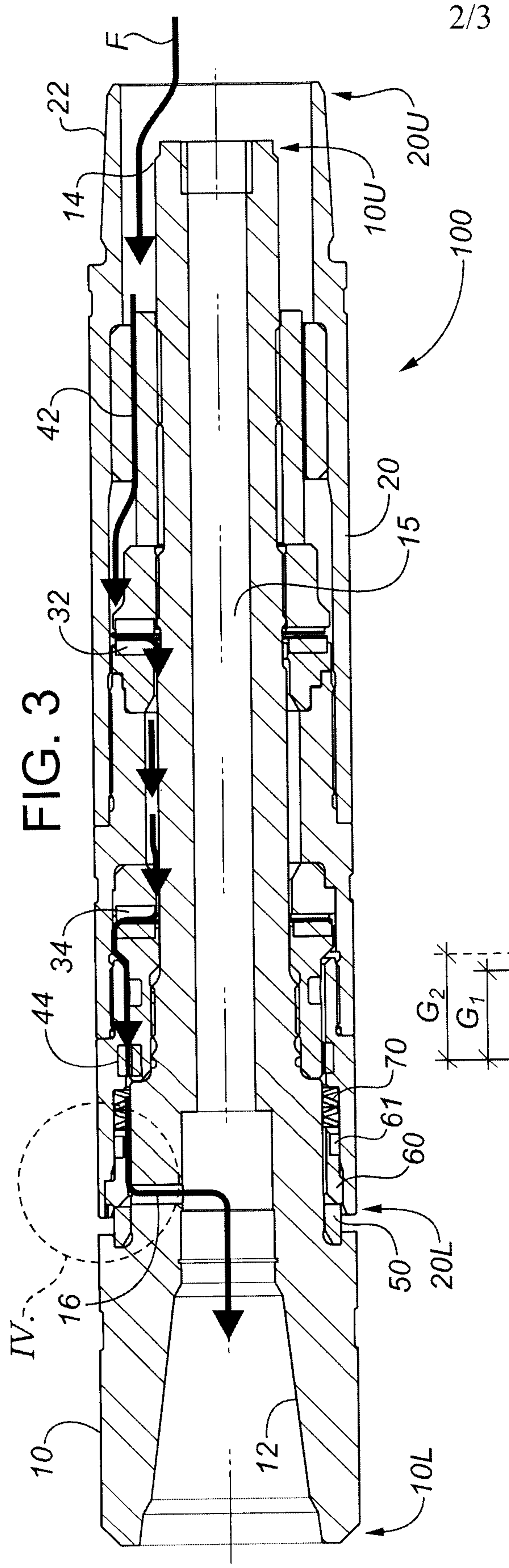
16
G_2
G_1
25
10
52
50

FIG. 2


F
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70
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16
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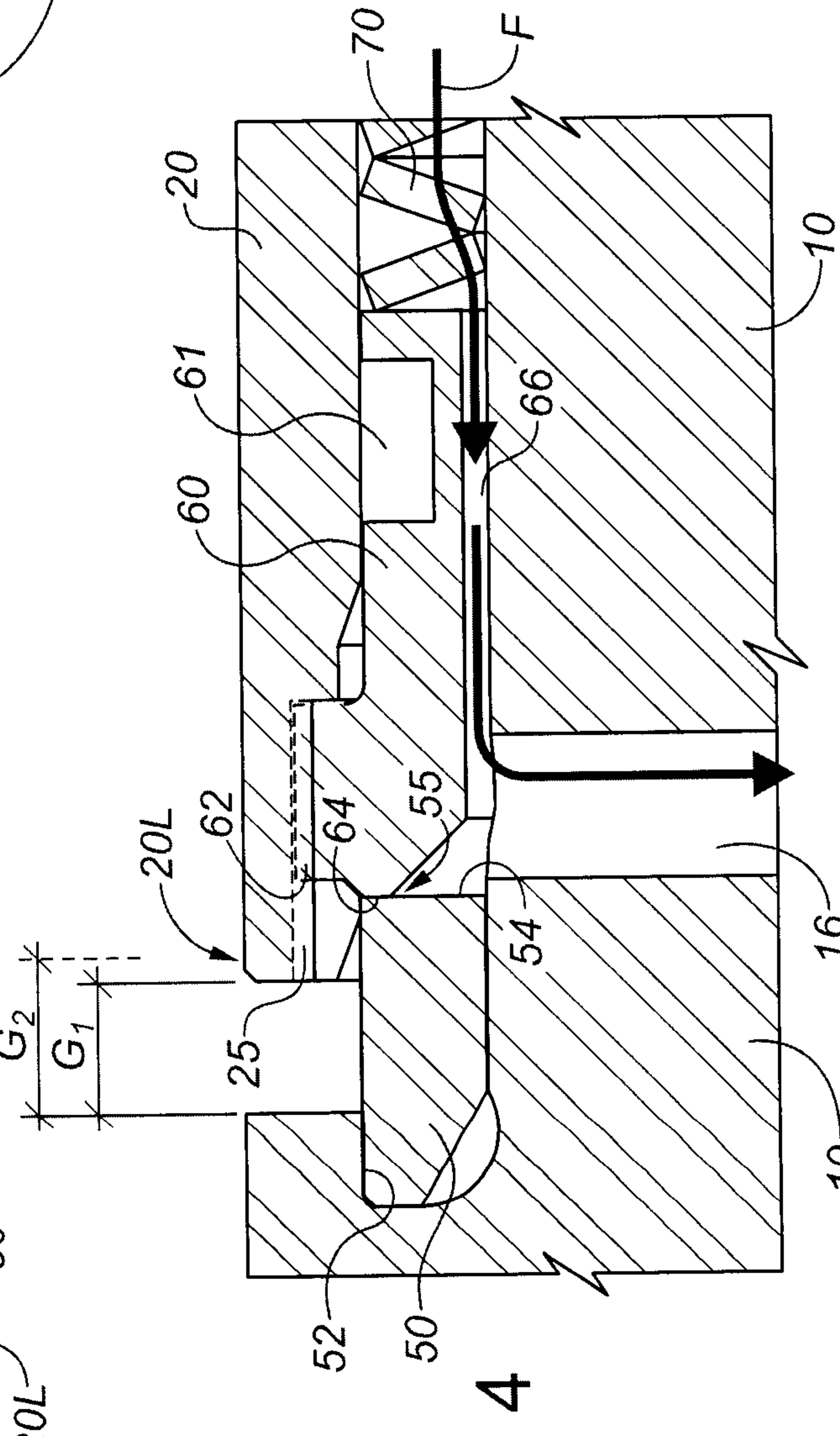
12
10L

FIG. 3


70
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16
G2
G1
25
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52
50

FIG. 4

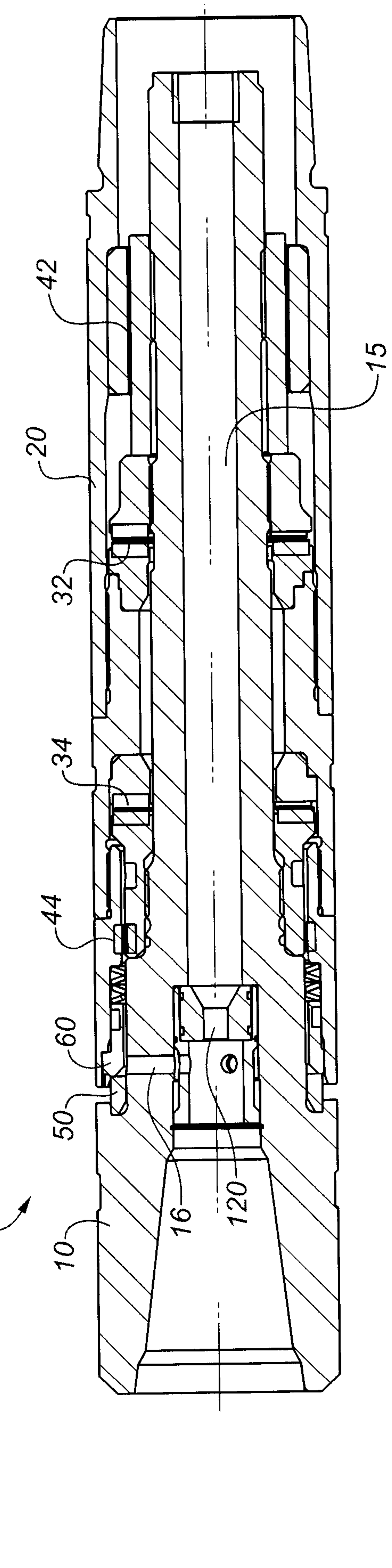
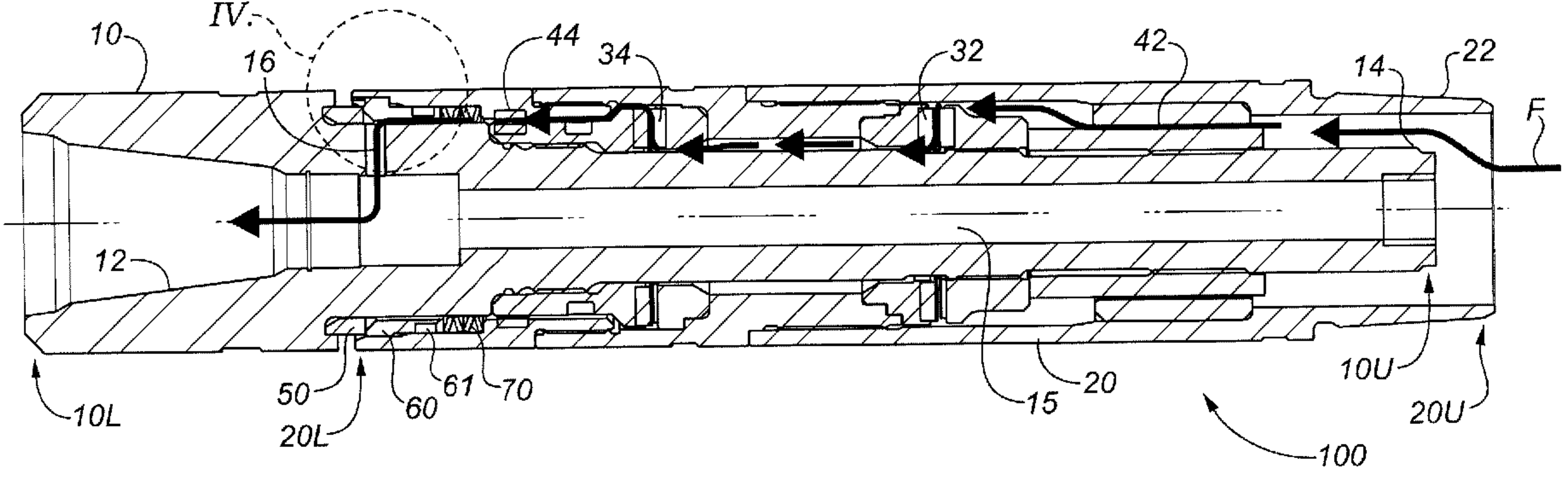


FIG. 5

110


IV.
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