

FRONTLINE TV

Out of the fire

While the media were worried about *Grease* being smoked out, Frontline TV was being gutted by flames. Rob Buckley visits the company's new home to see how its faring three months on

It's every md's worst nightmare: to watch his business burn down. Tim Mein went through that one Thursday at the beginning of September, when an electrical fire in the ceiling of Frontline Television's warehouse ended up gutting the building. Three months later and the company has found its feet again in new Covent Garden offices.

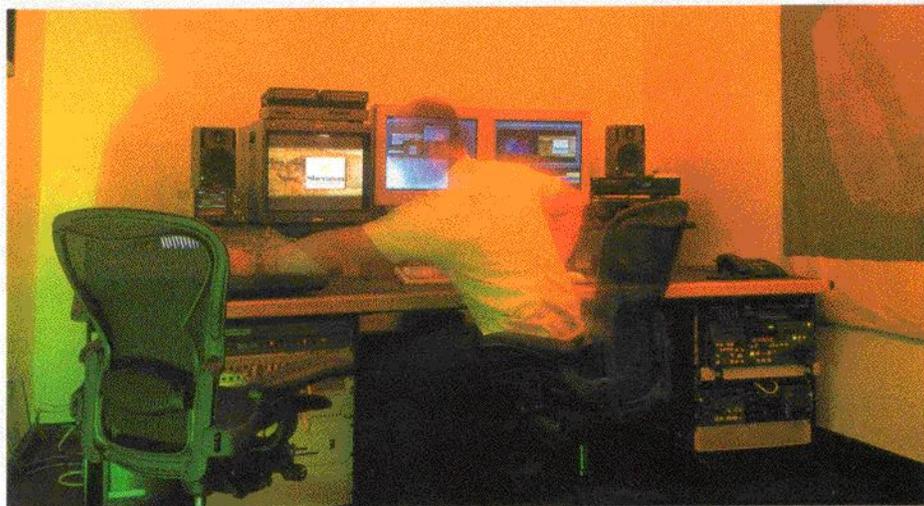
"Apart from one or two, everyone turned up on that Friday morning to see half a dozen fire engines still there," recalls Mein. "Some hadn't heard what had happened and burst into tears." Having watched the buildings he'd run the firm from for 19 years burn down, Mein had had to face ambulance-chasing loss negotiators, estate agents and even 24-hour emergency stationary printers before the majority of his staff arrived.

Through industry connections, Frontline found temporary premises after a couple of days in the basement conference room of a nearby hotel. "Then within six days of the fire, we were in here," says Mein about the new offices, "but we spent two weeks mak-

ing it habitable." Just over half the size of the original buildings, they hadn't been used in four months, there'd been no regular maintenance, the boiler hadn't been serviced and the loos were leaking. But at the end of two weeks, Frontline had two suites running. "I'd never been so happy to see colour bars in my life," Mein says.

Mein says support from customers - and surprisingly competitors - has been incredible. Happy Fish, Glass Beach, Oasis, Abacus and Component all helped by providing suites for Frontline's editors when the new premises were being sanitised. Audio company Dubbs even went so far as to turn away a Frontline client who wanted to use it directly, telling him he could still book his work through Frontline. But then there was at least one unnamed company which tried to poach clients.

And no one asked for cash - suppliers took it on trust they would be paid. "The md of Oasis, Tony Cloarec, whom I spoke to about getting some heavyweight editing into his suites, did phone me up,



almost as an after-thought," says Mein. "He said 'Tim, you were insured, weren't you? We will get this money back, won't we?' I said not to worry and that's all I had to say."

The main challenge has been retaining staff loyalty. After a meeting with the loss adjuster after the fire, he was able to assure employees there would be no redundancies; no one has left the company yet because of the changes. One of the silver linings to Frontline's cloud is that Mein has had more after-work drinks since the inferno than he had had the entire year before...

Frontline now has its Avid farm running as well its 2D and 3D graphics department. A digital linear suite is nearly completed at Metro and a dubbing suite is still being worked on. The company still doesn't



It may be temporary, but it's the new home of Frontline TV

know how much of its original equipment is salvageable - it's still being cleaned and tested - so until then, it's working with rented kit. And although the offices are temporary, it knows its clients won't put up with that as an excuse.

"It's no use saying to a punter that it's got no air-conditioning because it's temporary, because they'll say 'fuck this, we'll go to Nats.'" So although there's plenty of work still to do, Frontline does look like a facility again, thanks to staff mucking in

with the painting and moving. It's even had a chance to make improvements to things like furniture that everyone had wanted but no one had had time for.

"This has changed the company," Mein reflects. "We're far more aware of what we've got. And, if anything, the Frontline name is better-known that it ever has been before. Out of the trauma, we're building almost a new business - there is a great energy and excitement about that."

IN BRIEF

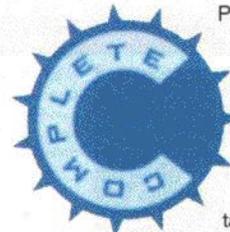


Continuing the current French exodus to Soho, flame operator Jean-Marc Demmer has left Paris for VTR. Demmer has already received complaints

for his work on The Chartans' latest promo - he was "too good" for the clients who ended up going over budget because they asked him to experiment too much.



The first company to use Avid's Sumatra on a commercial project, Aldis Animation, has completed the titles for the BBC's *Everyman*. Currently in beta, the software was used by Aldis on an over-weekend render for crowd scenes, which were composed by creating two characters and repositioning them using Sumatra's scripting.



Post-house Complete is changing image to pitch for work away from its traditional ad base. Head of production Andrew Swepson wants the company to take on more agency and broadcast work. "We've never had a fashionable image. We can't make ourselves into Smoke & Mirrors; we can have fun, though." Its offices will be renamed Slingsby Place.