INTERNATIONAL

Fire Ravages Office, Strengthens Team

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Imagine leaving work on a Friday afternoon not knowing there would be no office waiting on Monday morning. This is what happened to DCMA Americas employees in Ottawa, Canada.

I received the message while eating my breakfast on the morning of Monday, Sept. 16, 2008: "Lindsay, there has been a fire at the office; please do not come into work this morning." The local news showed the office building with black smoke pouring out of smashed windows. Suddenly it became clear that this was no accidental fire. Was anybody hurt? Do I still have a job? Who would do this? At this point I knew the DCMA Americas office would never be the same.

It took 68 firefighters and 16 vehicles more than two hours to bring the fire under control.

The DCMA Americas office was ravaged by a fire on a mid-September day, resulting in more than $7 million in damages. The ordeal, however, has made the DCMA Americas team closer and stronger. (Photos by Daryl Hill, DCMA Americas)

There was an estimated $7 million in damage to the structure and contents of the building, but thankfully, nobody was hurt in the incident.

Each day after the incident more and more information surfaced. Our office cameras caught the individual on tape, which turned out to be the key piece of evidence leading to the arsonist's arrest. Apparently he had broken in and out of the building several times that night and remained inside for almost three hours before setting fires.

During the break-in, each floor in the building was compromised. On the DCMA Americas floor, every cabinet and drawer that was locked had been broken into. This was cause for great concern. What did he want? What was he looking for? Who was he working for? According to the local police, the fire seemed to point toward a premeditated act by an experienced criminal. To everyone's amazement, two weeks later another fire was set in our building. Fortunately, this time an arrest was made the same day.

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It turned out the fires were not the work of a criminal mastermind; rather, it was merely another delinquent act by 31-year-old Robert Gill, who had a history — 53 prior convictions — of breaking and entering and was well-known to police. Gill described the reason for his crimes as the result of an uncontrollable urge to break into things. "I just want to stress that it was nothing personal," he said during his trial. "I didn't do it to any company or any individual for any reason … I didn't think it was going to turn out like this." Gill was sentenced to 11 years in prison for his crimes.

The devastation caused by the fire has had a huge impact on the office. The agency lost the building, computers, Internet, phones, printers, fax machines, scanners and office supplies. The biggest losses include several years' worth of lost work, e-mails, points of contact and personal belongings.

Our mission support group worked hard to get the office up and running again. Information technology personnel were extremely responsive. The local support agent, Elizabeth Gerard, worked around the clock obtaining the hardware, software and connectivity people required for their work.

In the week following the fire, common access cards were procured, and we secured a new building with the assistance of the Canadian government. Back at the old building, security issues were addressed, and the extraction process commenced immediately. Working arrangements were coordinated, and support to our

tertiary office in London, Ontario, was provided.

Gerard managed to keep a positive attitude through the entire ordeal. "I thought I was doing a good job by backing up my files onto a USB hard drive," she said. "But I kept the drive in my office, and then my office was gone."

Less than half of the office was set up to work from home, and with Gerard's help, others were able to jump on the telework bandwagon. Maintaining operations is critical when warfighters' lives are at stake, and teleworking enabled DCMA Americas to maintain its operations efficiently.

A few months before the fire, DCMA Americas welcomed a new commander, Navy Capt. Eric Wilson, and a new deputy commander, Lisa Haptonstall, to the office. With the help of several key individuals at our contract management office who emerged as leaders, plans to get back to business as usual were swiftly devised and executed.

The rebuilding of the DCMA Americas office will be completed sometime this summer. There were many lessons learned from the fire that the agency can benefit from.

These include:

- Ensuring a continuity of operations plan is available for different levels of disruption
- Knowing where IT lines are in the office to determine whether other offices are affected by disasters
- Reminding everyone to take their common access cards when away from their offices or desks
- Coordinating with the Employees Assistance Program to have counselors available on short notice
- Ensuring acting supervisors receive thorough pass downs, including recall lists
- Delegating disaster recovery responsibilities throughout the workforce
- Knowing the telecommuting process

During these turbulent times, each DCMA Americas employee has helped whenever needed. This is simply what "Americas" does; we're given a challenge, and we overcome it together. C

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