

2025 MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest: Second Place

# Sabotage Not from Within

Rebuilding the Corps for the Age of AI

by Maj Dilan M. Swift

On 2 April 2008, the Central Intelligence Agency declassified the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual*.<sup>1</sup> The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) drafted the manual during World War II, and it taught civilians and resistance operators in German-occupied territory how to bleed enemy systems by weaponizing bureaucracy, indecision, and feigned cluelessness. Gems included arguing endlessly over minor points of procedure, slowing work by inventing unnecessary steps, and routing simple decisions through excessive layers of approval. It was, in short, a manual for killing efficiency by a thousand cuts, and it is thus worthy of reflection. Unfortunately, we do not need enemy agents to apply these lessons today. If the OSS rewrote the manual for the modern Marine Corps, it would read like a checklist: create redundant military occupational specialties (MOSSs), not only preserve but increase staff structures at all costs, resist artificial intelligence (AI) tools and cling to legacy information technology (IT) systems, double down on industrial-era rote education, and spend precious budgets manning capabilities that we should automate. In 1944, sabotage was an act of resistance. Today, we often do it to ourselves.

## Machine Speed

If war is a contest of adaptation, then clinging to outdated structures, customs, and practices can be fatal. Future

**>Maj Swift is an Infantry Officer currently attending the School of Advanced Warfighting. He left active duty in 2021 after which he served in a variety of technology startups. Additionally, he most recently served as the Operations Officer for 4th Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion.**

conflict will be decided by Marines who can accelerate decision making, compress kill chains, and leverage machine autonomy at the tactical edge.<sup>2</sup> Every legacy system we protect, every headquarters we refuse to downsize, and ev-

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ery manual process we defend tightens the noose around our relevance. The Marine Corps' continued reliance on industrial-era models large, Napoleonic staff structures, outmoded professional military education (PME) models, and decision cycles dependent on manual data collection, synthesis, and presentation is not merely inefficient but a direct threat to the Corps' ability to survive and win in the age of joint all-domain conflict.

Agentic AI, the integration of human intent with machine-driven au-

tonomy, is already reshaping industry, education, and soon, the battlefield.<sup>3</sup> As Professor Benjamin Jensen asserts, victory will go to forces that trust decentralized actors, empower machine-augmented decision making, and move faster than bureaucratic command chains can comprehend.<sup>4</sup> Yet, instead of rapidly adapting, we are at risk of remaining anchored to legacy biases and practices. The opportunity is clear: by embracing automation, trimming bureaucracy, and fostering distributed human-machine teams in learning and beyond, we can sharpen the Marine Corps' edge rather than dull it with more staff slides and paper reenlistment packages. To understand why this opportunity remains untapped, we must first confront the internal mechanisms of resistance.

## Our New Saboteurs

Unlike private-sector organizations, the Corps operates without the corrective forces of market-based incentive structures. There is no day-to-day competitive pressure to reduce overhead, increase efficiency, or embrace innovation. As a result, outdated systems persist, and new capabilities are often viewed with suspicion rather than urgency.

Even worse, our incentive structure actively rewards inefficiency. In the private sector, working faster or automating tasks can buy back time, boost output, or increase compensation. In the military environment, greater efficiency does none of those things. Marines are expected to be in the office for predetermined hours or in the field for prescribed durations, regardless of task completion. This rigidity undermines incentives to work smarter. Faced with task saturation, units do not seek to reduce scope or seek automation; they request more personnel or generate a demand signal for the creation of yet another boutique MOS.<sup>5</sup> The Infantry Battalion Experiment encapsulates this reality. Instead of reducing and strategically tooling company and battalion staffs with better education, training, and AI tools, experts in cyber, information operations, and other warfighting functions are added at every echelon in a celebrated “S-Staff Pushdown.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, as marketing professor Scott Galloway frequently observes, public institutions and organizations that operate outside of market dynamics typically reward only two behaviors: decreasing responsibility and increasing compensation.<sup>7</sup> That dynamic is alive and well within our force. We prefer larger shops and more Marines, not time saved. We add MOSs, not automation, and we definitely do not compensate our most productive and efficient Marines more than their peers.

Accordingly, three primary issues act as internal saboteurs, all of which stem from the Service’s inherent hierarchical and conservative culture. First, there is a cultural reluctance to experiment with and adopt modern IT. For example, despite the inherent automation and integration features built into tools like Microsoft Teams, including API-based plug-ins, task workflows, and realtime document routing, many units still rely on hard copy routing sheets and physical packages hand-carried from office to office. The full capabilities of even approved tools are rarely used, let alone explored for their potential to reduce manual burden. This is not just a Marine Corps problem; it is department-wide. As Erik Schuh noted in *War on*

*the Rocks*, it took the DOD over a decade to fully adopt Microsoft Teams.<sup>8</sup> At the current pace of innovation in commercial software, a ten-year delay might as well be a generation.

Second, the Corps maintains a preference for traditional PME and staffing models. Our staff system remains rooted in 18th-century French innovations, while our education methods still reflect Industrial-Age approaches that Marine leaders have admitted prioritize rote memorization and standardized classroom instruction.<sup>9</sup> Despite massive advances in AI-driven personalized learning, we continue to expand our staff with each new MOS and subject-matter expert, rarely asking whether these roles might be automated, consolidated, or

whether the Marine Corps will lead it or lag behind it.

Fortunately, the tools we need already exist. Agentic AI systems and large language models are transforming civilian sectors, enabling companies to boost productivity and reduce headcount. These tools are not theoretical; they are already automating workflows and generating products in seconds that once took hours. As Dr. Jensen notes, “the era of military planners manually gathering limited data and compiling static ... options on briefing slides is over.”<sup>10</sup> This is debatable; it is only over if we so choose.

This has immediate implications for force structure. For example, at present, roughly 40 percent of 1st

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eliminated. Rather than streamline for speed and agility, we reinforce a structure that can slow us down and make us more vulnerable on the battlefield.

Finally, there remains a general resistance to machine-augmented decision making. This stems not from a lack of access to AI tools but from a lack of trust. In a profession that prizes human judgment, the idea of sharing or ceding cognitive labor to AI is often viewed as dangerous or disloyal. But in environments where milliseconds matter, the refusal to incorporate AI into planning and execution is not a noble stand for tradition, it can be a liability.

#### **Leading in the Age of Automation—Automate the Tail to Sharpen the Tooth**

Yet, despite cultural inertia, we now have a tremendous opportunity. Two powerful forces, federal pressure to reduce costs and the rapid daily advances in AI, have converged to create a unique opportunity to root out the sabotage culture that undermines efficiency and dulls lethality. The question is not whether change is coming, it is

MarDiv is composed of non-combat arms support personnel.<sup>11</sup> Within that population, entire communities such as administration and intelligence are well-positioned for AI augmentation. If automation were to increase productivity by even 50 percent in those fields, we could theoretically reduce such support capabilities by half. A 50 percent reduction in administration and intelligence personnel alone would free up an estimated 342 Marines, enough to double the division’s anti-tank missilemen or radically scale unmanned aerial vehicle operator ranks. We do not have to divest to invest. Instead of having to “sharpen the tooth *and* automate the tail,” we can automate the tail to sharpen the tooth.<sup>12</sup>

What’s more, the spirit of experimentation already exists within the Corps. From the ARES (Augmented Reconnaissance and Estimate of the Situation) tool developed by Capt Ryan Helm to the School of Advanced Warfighting’s ongoing experimentation with Scale AI’s Donovan large-language-model interaction tool, innovations are pushing forward.<sup>13</sup> The challenge is not

innovation, it is institutional permission and incentive. Publication of the Corps' *Artificial Intelligence Strategy* and initiation of the Marine Corps' inaugural Generative Artificial Intelligence Workshop are noteworthy first steps. But these capabilities need more than pilot programs; they need continuous and meaningful policy backing, adoption incentives, funding, and incorporation into manpower and training doctrine.

Fortunately, federal policy can be helpful here. The Marine Corps should embrace the ethos behind the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Again, as Schuh argues, DOGE is not just about saving money, it is about spending the right money to unleash productivity and increase lethality.<sup>14</sup> Artificial intelligence automation offers a clear path to reduce bloat, increase individual and unit proficiency and autonomy, and accelerate operational tempo by enabling Marines to weaponize speed and time.<sup>15</sup> Simply, we should adopt a mentality that every Marine freed from our support structure is a Marine available to man a rifle, drone, or missile. With this paradigm, automation can become a battlefield multiplier.

### Reforming Education & Lethality

To seize the advantage offered by AI tooling, the Marine Corps must take a hard look at its staffing and education models. We must identify MOSs and support functions ripe for AI and process automation, and we must fully adopt AI-driven education in PME. The goal should be simple: reduce headcount in low-lethality, high-repetition career fields and reinvest those gains into developing highly trained Marines, critical combat capabilities, and additional automated tooling. Doing more and being better with less cannot remain hollow; it must be a reality.

We must also invest in tools that make that mandate possible. Recent policy shifts, like loosening software procurement restrictions under the Hegseth Software Modernization Guidance, offer the flexibility to pursue, test, and scale AI solutions tailored to warfighting needs.<sup>16</sup> With these chang-

es, every staff officer should soon have access to a personal "S-AI" agents: an AI-powered assistant trained in doctrine, after-action reports, historical case studies, capable of generating planning products, logistics forecasts, and more. These tools are no longer science fiction. Many officers are already customizing commercial AI tools to help with routine, non-sensitive, administrative tasks. With commercial tech sector innovation and appropriate security protocols, they can become instrumental.

Second, we must fully embrace the AI educational revolution transforming forward-leaning civilian education

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institutions. Artificial intelligence tools are currently capable of developing customized curricula from a designated corpus of learning materials, assessing learner mastery, and then modifying lesson plans accordingly. These AI tools are demonstrably capable of increasing learning retention and student engagement, thereby decreasing time spent in formal education.<sup>17</sup> This will increase the speed of deploying highly trained Marines out to the operating forces.

Third, to reinforce this transformation, the Corps must continue encouraging bottom-up experimentation. *MARADMINs* 205/25 and 602/24, which champion efficiency innovation and AI readiness, should be backed with tangible incentives.<sup>18</sup> Launch AI-specific challenges across the fleet. Recognize Marines and units who build custom GPTs or develop their own automation tools. These efforts will not only accelerate learning, but they will also normalize experimentation.

Finally, we must realign incentives to reward efficiency and operational creativity. Today, Marines who find ways to save time or streamline work-

flows are rarely recognized, they are rewarded with yet more work. This "curse of competency" is often what inadvertently drives out the highest performers.<sup>19</sup> Efficiency buys nothing under the current system. This must change. Again, Schuh, "when personnel spend more time fighting their systems than executing their mission, it not only degrades productivity but also delays critical decisions," inhibits productivity, and dulls initiative.<sup>20</sup> When Marines spend more time formatting briefing slides than training for combat, the consequences can be tragic.

### Conclusion

In 1944, the OSS taught civilians how to destroy an enemy war machine from within, slow it down, bog it in bureaucracy, bury it in indecision. The brilliance of the *Simple Sabotage Manual* was that it didn't require explosives or espionage. All it took was a culture of delay, friction, and rigid procedure.

Eighty years later, we face a different battlefield but the same dangers. We do not need a foreign agent to sabotage the Corps. We can do it ourselves by rejecting automation, preserving bloated staffs, and clinging to legacy educational models and processes designed for a slower age. Every time we resist AI integration, protect unnecessary billets, or punish efficiency with more hours and tasks, we follow the manual to the letter.

The future of warfare demands a different kind of force: smarter, leaner, faster, and adaptive. If we want to prevail in this era of complex multi-domain warfare, we must not only root out these inadvertent acts of internal sabotage, we must reverse them entirely. Automate the tail. Sharpen the tooth. Invest in tools that enable and serve warfighters. The OSS manual was once a guide for our enemies. It should not be a prophecy for us.

### Notes

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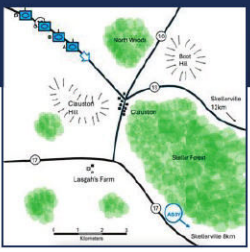
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