Modern Trenches, Modern Threats: Combat Engineering in the Drone Age

U.S. Navy Sailors assigned to Naval Construction Battalion 14 and Marines assigned to 8th Engineering Support Battalion conduct trench reinforcement training to increase combat engineering capabilities during exercise Baltic Operations 2025 (BALTOPS 25), June 6, 2025, in Skrunda, Latvia.
By Chief Mass Communication Specialist Justin Stumberg, June 13, 2025

SKRUNDA, Latvia – In the wooded fields of western Latvia, lines of freshly turned earth snake across the terrain—dug not by history, but by engineers preparing for the future fight.
A century after trench warfare defined conflict in Europe, the tactic is making a modern return, this time shaped by airborne threats that are autonomous, persistent, and digital.

As part of exercise Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) 2025, U.S. Navy Seabees, U.S. Marines from 8th Engineer Support Battalion (ESB), and Latvian Army engineers are constructing a fortified trench network designed for survivability in a drone-contested battlespace. The project serves both as a realistic rehearsal and a proof of concept for how modern combat engineers support maneuverability, concealment, and endurance in multi-domain operations.

“We are creating positions designed for modern combat environments,” said Lt. j.g. Wiatt Lewis, officer in charge of Naval Construction Battalion (NCB) 14. “These field fortifications are built to reduce detection, limit exposure to unmanned systems, and enhance force protection across the battlespace.”

Lewis emphasized that as the operational environment evolves, so must the approach to allied engineering and maneuver.

“Every trench, every covered position demonstrates a shared commitment to mobility, concealment, and resilience,” said Lewis.

A Classic Concept Meets a Modern Fight

Though trench warfare may evoke images of muddy stalemates and early 20th-century weaponry, recent conflicts have proven that the tactic is far from obsolete. The ongoing war in Ukraine has demonstrated how entrenched positions, overhead cover, and field fortifications can provide critical protection against modern threats including drones and precision fires. What was once viewed as a relic of past wars has reemerged as a vital component of survivability in high-intensity, large-scale ground combat.

Today’s engineers are applying that hard-earned relevance to modern doctrine. Using precision equipment, updated tactics, and threat-informed design, U.S. Navy Seabees, Marine Corps combat engineers, and allied forces are modernizing trenches

for use in multi-domain environments.

Seabees provide the horizontal construction expertise—operating bulldozers, graders, and compactors to carve structured fighting positions into dense Baltic soil.

Meanwhile, Marines from 8th ESB bring combat engineering insight, ensuring the trench layout supports tactical movement, defensibility, and low visibility against drone reconnaissance and attack.

“We have trained for this kind of work in the United States, but doing it here alongside the Seabees and our Latvian partners adds a different level of complexity,” explained SSgt. Austin Leigh, combat engineer and platoon sergeant with 8th ESB. “We are always thinking about our visibility from above, the effects of thermal detection, and how to keep the position secure from multiple angles.”

Partnered, Resourceful, Ready

One of the most distinctive aspects of this multinational effort is the Latvian Army’s use of a field-deployable sawmill, providing raw timber milled on site. The lumber is then used to reinforce trench walls, build overhead cover and concealment, and create tactical infrastructure, eliminating the need for long-lead construction materials that are not always readily available.

“Having a sawmill out here and cutting our own lumber changes the game,” said Chief Construction Mechanic William Fox, NCB 14 senior enlisted leader. “We are not waiting on flatbeds or shipping containers. We’re using what is already around us to get the job done.

Fox explained that producing timber on site has helped his team stay on schedule and adapt in real time.

“Every board we cut with our own hands is one less we have to

wait for," he said. "It keeps the crew moving, keeps the project rolling, and honestly, it just feels good to build something right here with what we have."

This effort also highlights the value of integrated training in a joint and allied environment. Seabees, Marines, and Latvian engineers have worked shoulder to shoulder, blending skills, sharing tools, and building trust through every shovel of earth and cut of timber.

"This has been some of the most valuable training I have had in my 12 years in the Navy," said Builder 1st Class Nathan Burke, project supervisor with NCB 14. "It has been a true privilege to work alongside both ESB Marines and the Latvian forces. I only hope we will be able to expand upon what we have started here."

Burke noted that the project not only benefited the mission—it also sharpened the warfighting instincts of the next generation.

"This trench project has provided a tremendous opportunity for our junior Bees and Marines to encounter and overcome some unique challenges," he said. "It is these types of problem-solving skills that will be crucial when we are operating in a true wartime scenario."

He added that the work accomplished in Skrunda is only the beginning of what is possible when allied engineers train together with a shared purpose.

"I am humbled by and incredibly proud of what our [team] has accomplished here these past weeks," said Burke. "I feel as though we have just scraped the crust on what we could do here to develop and sharpen our skills, should we find ourselves fighting alongside our partners in the region."

Preparing for the Next Fight

As training wraps in Skrunda, the trenches carved into the Latvian soil remain behind, standing as evidence of what can be accomplished when engineers from different nations work side by side. Built with shovels, saws, and shared experience, the project adds lasting value to the local training area and the forces who may use it in the future.

BALTOPS 2025 serves as a proving ground for ships, aircraft, and the people who build, dig, and design the infrastructure that supports them. In an era shaped by technology and unpredictability, the most effective tools are often the ones forged by hand, in the field, together.

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