The following short story was written by Michael D. Durkota of North Huntingdon. A veteran of the United States Navy, Michael participated in VetsWrite Westmoreland last fall (2016). His first novel, *Once in a Blue Year*, was published in 2015.

Black Rifle

The old man had not fired the rifle in years. He was certain the recoil would shatter his shoulder. The rifle was a gift from his son Dustin. The old man didn’t have much need for a rifle, but on the weekends Dustin would visit and they would fire off a few rounds that Dustin had acquired. Dustin was dead now, just like the rest.

The rifle was heavy and black and reminded him of the rifle he had carried in the war. He didn’t like to think about the war. He didn’t like that the rifle made him think about the war. He had wanted to smoke weed and listen to Hendrix with his friends, but they pulled his number and handed him a rifle and sent him to a jungle halfway around the world.

He stared at the photo of Dustin on the wall as he fumbled to load the three remaining rounds into the magazine. He knew they were coming. He knew he didn’t have much time. By the sound and direction of the shots that woke him, they were about 2000 yards away. That would put them at Miller’s cabin. Miller only had a few shotgun rounds stashed away. The old man had heard two blasts of the shotgun followed by a barrage of rifle and small arm fire. After that it was silent. Miller was certainly dead. God rest his soul.

After the guns were banned, Dustin had led the rebellion. They were successful for a while. They made the news with their Gadsden flags flying. But eventually they were captured and killed. One by one. They stopped bothering with trials altogether and executed them on the spot, on their knees, militant to the end.

The old man heard the trucks approaching. Heavy and armored. He could hear the crunch of the gravel under wide tires. He heard a voice shouting out orders. He couldn’t hear the words, just the tone. He knew that tone well, another thing to remind him of the war. Had he known it would end like this, the old man would have smoked weed with his friends and listened to Joplin. It was all for nothing in the end. This end.

He heard boots outside the door and chambered his final round. He knew they wouldn’t bother to knock, so he pointed the rifle and waited for the door to burst open.

It felt good to tug a trigger again.

The smell of gunpowder

reminded him of Dustin

on those weekends long ago.

His shoulder did not shatter.

So he squeezed that cold steel

and pulled twice more.