Comment ? Time to re-think police tactics

The verdict is in.

A Toronto Police officer has been found guilty of attempted murder for shooting a man on a streetcar in 2013. It was a case that garnered huge public attention, largely because the incident was captured on video by a bystander and within minutes was flashed around the world on the Internet.

The outcome of this incident is tragic on many levels. One person is dead and will never see his 20th birthday. His family has lost a son and brother.

On the other hand, the police officer will almost certainly be spending time behind bars, and possibly a considerable amount of time. Once the jury's verdict leads to a conviction, he will have a criminal record, his career will be over and his family will be suffering as well.

No matter what you think after watching this video, you can't second-guess the police officers involved in this incident just because you saw it on Youtube.

Responding to a ?man with a knife? call is going to be a stressful situation and quite often decisions have to be made in split seconds. Watching an event unfold on a video screen is not the same as being there.

What many people seem to forget about this incident is that the deceased teenager was responsible for the police being there in the first place. He had terrorized a streetcar full of people, swung a knife at the throat of an innocent person and threatened everyone aboard. Once he started this behaviour, there's no doubt the night was going to end badly for him, one way or another.

When testifying for the defence at the trial, the young woman who came within inches of having her throat slashed on that streetcar said, ?I need people to know that Yatim was dangerous. He was going to kill me.?

He told another passenger she ?wasn't going anywhere? while standing in front of her with his knife held in a threatening manner.

The man's family claims he had no history of mental illness or violence. He did, however, have a moderately high levels of the drug ecstasy, some marijuana, and traces of cocaine in his system. Why he behaved like he did that night is a mystery.

The public's response to the outcome of this event focused on the fact that Sammy Yatim was shot dead in what was perceived as an unnecessary use of force. He was shot at nine times, with eight of those bullets hitting the mark. An initial volley dropped him to the floor of the streetcar, and another round of shots ensured that he was dead.

It was that second round of gunfire that resulted in the guilty verdict.

What must be considered is the appropriate use of firearms by police, especially in the big cities where it has become almost routine. What seems to have happened over the course of the last few decades is that police services in the large cities, notably Toronto and Montreal, have adopted an American style of policing, where pulling a gun isn't a big deal.

But it should be. This isn't Texas or Arizona where sticking a gun in someone's ear during a routine traffic stop is part of the job.

An issued firearm is supposed to be used only when there is a real threat to an officer's life, not as a tool of intimidation. The badge, the uniform, and the authority that goes with them should be intimidating enough.

Since the streetcar incident the focus is now on police tactics.

Every time a person points a firearm there is potential for deadly consequences.

Police officers are going to run up against dangerous situations. That's part of the job. But this isn't the Wild Wild West, where settling a dispute depends on who's faster on the draw. The actions and results are real. And it's not a Hollywood movie where blasting someone into oblivion only means you'll be an hour late for dinner.

It's time to review how police are trained to act in some situations. A man with a three-inch blade standing alone cornered on a streetcar and surrounded by police, seems an unlikely target for the end of a gun.

Sometimes just backing off and diffusing the situation without the use of deadly force results in everyone going home alive.