

OPINION VERSUS ACHIEVEMENT.

SPEAKING at the dinner of the Royal Aero Club last week, Major Sir Alexander Bannerman, the chief of the British Army aeronautical service, delivered himself of the extraordinary dictum that, in his opinion, the aeroplane was not very far ahead, for military purposes, of what it was at the time of Wilbur Wright's first flight. Patience, he said, must be the motto, and the military air corps were imbued with that sense of patience which he advocated. Coming from the head of that corps, these words have a deep and we had almost said a sinister significance, for they argue first of all that the military authorities are keeping themselves deliberately in the dark upon the progress of flight, and further that they are quite content to remain ignorant of current developments, the while this country's rivals get a start for which the bitterest regret may one day be experienced. That, as an explanation, is scarcely tenable in practice for we are all of us aware that the gallant officer and his colleagues are fully posted upon what is going on in Continental countries and at home. For that reason alone it is far from easy to discover what the words we have quoted could have underlying them, for that he could have meant exactly what he said is inconceivable. It is all so extraordinary that we frankly admit the riddle is too much for us.

But in case, by any chance, the Major did mean his words to be taken literally, it may be useful to glance over what has been done during the week or ten days before and after the speech under notice and see whether there is to be found any confirmation of the opinion expressed. First of all we have Mr. Sopwith's flight to Windsor and his reception by the King. Certainly this achievement happened on the day after the R.Ae.C. dinner, but it will serve to point the moral as well as though it had occurred previously, because it was not an extraordinary thing at all as long-distance cross-country flights go, but contrasted with the first of the Wright efforts it certainly savours of progress. If the aeroplane could do nothing more than achieve a flight from Brooklands to Windsor as a pre-determined destination, we should still, with the ignorance of the layman, believe that as a military machine it was worth more than when it was merely shown to be capable of maintaining itself in the air for a brief time.

It is admitted that they do these things better in France, and there the military authorities do not seem to share the opinions of the head of this country's military aeronautical service. So much do they think of the aeroplane as an accessory to modern war—and their opinions are founded on the practical experience gained in the course of last year's manoeuvres—that the French Army now possesses over thirty aeroplanes and has a large and efficient staff of pilots to navigate them. The lessons of those manoeuvres, which have apparently been largely discounted by Major Bannerman and his colleagues, are sufficiently well known that we need hardly labour them now; but it is unquestionably profitable to turn for a moment to what has been done by French military aviators during only the past few days.

On Wednesday of last week Captain Bellenger on a monoplane with a 50-h.p. engine flew from Paris to Bordeaux, a distance of 360 miles, which he covered in less time than the ordinary express. This performance again we should describe as marking a very considerable advance in the aeroplane as a military instrument since the first historic flights of Wilbur Wright. We may be

wrong, of course, but we simply look at the question from a plain everyday civilian standpoint. The way it strikes us is that if an aeroplane is capable of making a three-hundred-and-sixty mile journey at high altitudes with the speed and certainty of an express train—as this flight has demonstrated it can—then given a state of war, with railways damaged and roads overrun by the enemy, the aeroplane must be simply invaluable to a commander who finds it necessary to convey information or orders to distant commands. That, too, is apart from any tactical value it may have for scouting or attacking purposes.

If this flight stood alone as an instance of the military value of the aeroplane it might be contended that it was merely rendered possible by a combination of luck and favourable circumstances which enabled Captain Bellenger to achieve it, followed the next day by his journey to Pau, exactly following his plan as he had originally announced at the start. On the same day, however, another performance of almost equal merit, albeit under somewhat different conditions, was achieved by another French military aviator. A non-commissioned officer of the aeroplane corps, stationed at Chalons, was ordered by telegram from the Minister of War, quite as a matter of routine, to fly to Satory, near Versailles, taking an officer with him. Equally as a matter of ordinary routine, the man started out with a Farman biplane, and arrived safely at his destination two hours later. Surely this, once more, stamps the aeroplane as having advanced immeasurably in military value. It is no longer a matter of waiting for a calm day and then, with everything in favour, achieving a world's record flight of a mile and a half in a straight line—the military aviator in France now seems to take things in his stride, as it were, and thinks no more of setting out on a cross-country flight than if he were ordered to get out his commanding officer's car and drive him to a given destination by road. And yet there are responsible leading British authorities who do not think the aeroplane has progressed.

Another instance—again in another country—which confirms the view above expressed is Mr. Ely's wonderful performance in flying from a military camp across San Francisco thirteen miles out to sea, alighting upon a United States battleship and again returning to the point from which he started, a sufficient demonstration of the certainty of control of the aeroplane which should satisfy the most exacting of critics that not only has practical development gone ahead, but that the progress of the past three years has been almost incalculable. Lastly we have Mr. Cody's flight during last week-end, when he carried a passenger standing ten feet above the plane from the centre of the machine, and Lemartin's flight at Pau on a Blériot monoplane carrying eight passengers for a distance of over 8 miles. What more can be required to prove the case than these recent instances we have given?

Surely it must be a matter of serious concern to everyone and particularly to those who are identified with the science of flight to find that while all these things are being done by private enterprise at home and by official energy as well abroad, British officialdom can express itself willing to mark time and practise patience. It is not by a policy of that kind that Great Britain will take her place at the head of the nations in the race for the supremacy of the air, which may one day mean so much to her people.