

OBITUARIES

RITCHIE GARDINER

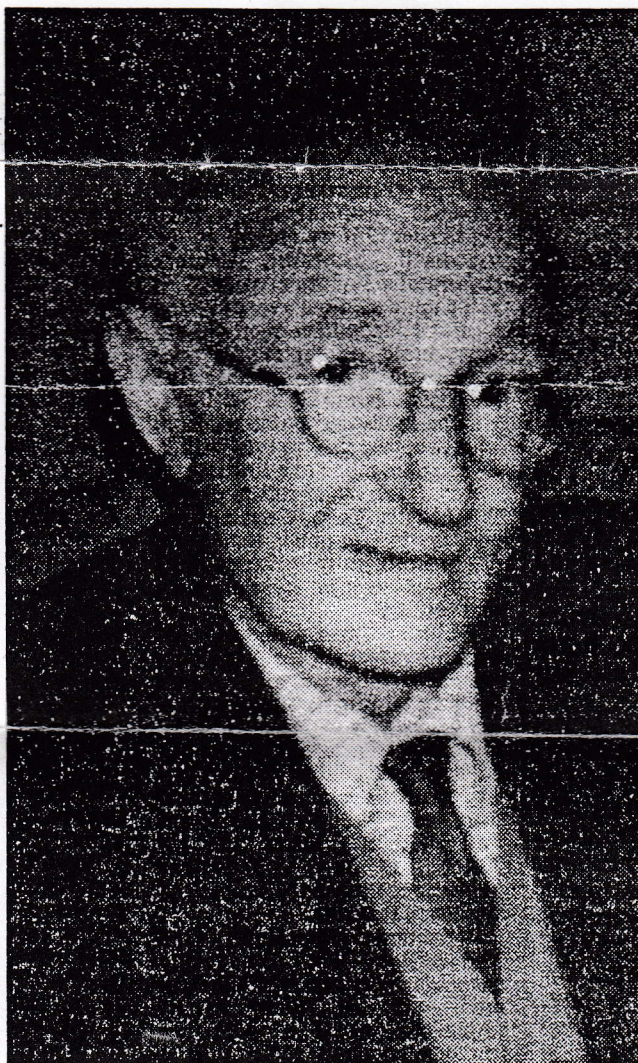
John Ritchie Gardiner, OBE, GM, who was head of the Burma Section of Special Operations Executive (Force 136), directing guerrilla operations in Japanese-held territory from late 1942 until the end of the war, died on September 25 aged 87. He was born on April 8, 1903.

FORCE 136 in Burma, directed from Calcutta by Ritchie Gardiner, played a valuable role in support of General Slim's 14th Army in Burma, harassing Japanese supply lines and making hit and run raids, forcing them to use up valuable troops in guarding their communications and installations.

Perhaps its most valuable single operation was in 1945 when SOE parties carried out a series of ambushes on the Japanese 15th Division as it moved towards Toungoo, with the aim of blocking the British IV Corps advance on Rangoon. Many of Force 136's skirmishing attacks developed into virtual pitched battles and caused fatal delay to the Japanese, permitting Slim to win the race for Toungoo. If the Japanese had got there first it is at least questionable whether Slim would have managed to continue to Rangoon as he did. Slim himself acknowledged Force 136's effort and praised SOE's valuable influence on operations.

John Ritchie Gardiner was born in Dalry, Ayrshire, and educated at St Mary's, Melrose, and Clifton College. He took a degree in mining at the then Royal Technical College in Glasgow. In those days students had to spend a year working down a mine before a degree could be awarded, and this experience left Gardiner with a sympathetic understanding of miners and people in similarly arduous trades. A mining career did not materialise, however, and in 1925 he went to Burma to work for a Macgregor and Co, a firm foresting teak in the area around Toungoo. He was a forest assistant for 10 years, living and working in the jungles for eight months of the year. This knowledge of the terrain and ability to adapt to the rain-forest climate stood him in invaluable stead later, when war came.

When the Japanese invaded Burma, Gardiner became one of the "last ditches", a group



of European civilians detailed to carry out demolitions of the docks and refineries. On the final order to abandon Rangoon, he made his way north as it was felt, optimistically, that the Japanese advance might be stemmed around Toungoo. However he soon ran into the bulk of the army which was held up by a Japanese roadblock. Seeing how precarious the situation was he decided to return to Rangoon where he escaped by boat from the abandoned city.

At that time, it was not clear that the whole of Burma was going to fall. Feeling he still had a role to play, Gardiner wangled a flight back to a jungle strip in the centre of the country. He must have been one of the very few men to return to Burma after having had made good his escape. He reached Maymo, where he made his services available to the governor. He was then appointed deputy commis-

sioner of another town: unfortunately it had already fallen to the Japanese in the chaotic circumstances of the time. Thereafter he worked on various engineering projects until May 1942 when it was time to become a refugee for the second time.

Escape on this occasion was through a high mountain pass into India. It took Gardiner and his band of 14 men eight weeks at the height of the monsoon to make the trek. They were ill-equipped, unprepared, and with very little food. It was a feat of endurance which not all survived. When they were crossing one of the many fast flowing mountain rivers in the region one of the party was swept away and, trapped between a log and a rock under water, was in immediate danger of drowning. Gardiner, who had already crossed safely, went back into the torrent and eventually freed him. For this

he was awarded the George Medal.

When the survivors got to India Gardiner was recruited by the Indian mission of SOE and became head of the Burma section. The aim was sabotage and subversion behind enemy lines. At first, operations were based on those brave officers who had remained behind with the Karen guerrillas when Burma was being overrun. By 1944, a number of small parties of British officers were being dropped in to raise and train hillmen. Once parties were established, they searched out Japanese dumps and headquarters. The locations of these were then reported back for subsequent bombing by the RAF. By early 1945, from his headquarters in Calcutta, Gardiner was directing over 70 officers and nearly 12,000 men under arms in occupied Burma. When it became apparent that the Burma National Army (which had been raised by the Japanese) and its leader, Aung San, wanted to come over to the British side, the Burma government was bitterly opposed. Aung San had several charges hanging over him, including one of murder, and conventional opinion was that he should be given short shrift. But Gardiner's was one of the voices arguing that his overtures should be accepted. Eventually the Burma National Army added its weight to the defeat of the Japanese. Gardiner was made an OBE for his work with SOE.

After the war, he returned to his forestry work as a director and forest manager of Macgregor and Co until nationalisation in 1948. He took his seat again on Rangoon council and was involved in restoring the city after three years occupation by the Japanese.

Shortly before Burmese independence, he returned to his native Ayrshire where he farmed for 30 years. It was always a source of sorrow and concern to him that the Karen people, who had fought so loyally for the British, had to be left to fend for themselves against their big brothers, the Burmans.

Ritchie Gardiner is survived by his wife, Mary Breckenridge, whom he married in 1937, and three sons. Their daughter died earlier this year.