

Lt Cdr Paul Leyton

Officer, rocket engineer and restaurateur who served the snails he bred in a disused swimming pool

Lieutenant-Commander Paul Leyton, who has died aged 84, won the DSC as a Fleet Air Arm officer in the carrier *Furious* in 1944; two years later he retired from the Navy and became one of the country's leading rocket engineers; and after that a restaurateur in Somerset, known for his savoury dishes of home-grown Mendip Snails.

Paul Henry Leyton was born on June 1 1914 and went to Kingswood School, bath. After a brief spell with Austin Motors, he joined the RAF Reserve for flying training in 1935, getting his wings in August 1936.

He transferred to the Air Branch of the Royal Navy in 1938 and after an aero-engineering course served at HMS *Kestrel*, Worthy Down, and then in the carrier *Argus*, ferrying Hurricanes and Spitfires to Malta, in 1941.

In 1942, Leyton served on HMS *Daedalus*, Lee-on-Solent, and at HMS *Landrail*, Machrihanish, Argyll, before joining *Furious* as Air Engineering Officer for the next 18 months. *Furious's* aircraft took part in the series of Fleet Air Arm attacks on the German battleship *Tirpitz*, in Kaafjord, Norway, in the spring and summer of 1944 and in the sinking of 25,000 tons of enemy shipping along the Norwegian coast.

It was the professional skill and dedication of Leyton and his staff which resulted in the very high rate of serviceability of *Furious's* aircraft in this intense period of operations.

When *Furious* paid off for the last time in September 1944, Leyton went to HMS *Dipper*, Henstridge, Somerset, as Air Engineer Officer. He then transferred to the emergency list and left the Navy in 1946.

After the war, Leyton worked for Sperry Gyroscope, in their Seaslug Guided Weapons Trials team, for Vickers at Weybridge as Chief Guided Weapons Trials Engineer, and for Saunders Roe, Cowes, as Chief Rocket Development Engineer on the Black Knight.

Although by then well known to the public as "Our Man at Woomera" [the rocket test site in Australia] Leyton resigned in 1958 in protest over what he considered was the lack of an official policy on space research. He said he was "fed up with working for other people anyway. But what can you do? You can't build rockets on your own in your back garden."

He was for two years Black & Deckers Director of Engineering before, in 1961, taking over the Miners Arms at Priddy, 1,000ft up on the Mendip Hills. Although his restaurant was small, with only 24 covers, Leyton's extensive menu of 17 starters, 22 main courses and 15 finishing dishes was soon recommended by Raymond Postgate and Egon Ronay.

His cocktail of Angostura, ice, brandy, tonic, lemon and local herbs, called LLEBS (Land Lord's Extra Bloody Special), was also highly commended. Leyton used frozen food in some dishes and set up Leytons (Foods) Ltd, to distribute frozen food by mail order in insulated containers.

He also claimed to run the smallest brewery in the country, brewing 60 to 100 gallons a year, sold only to customers in the restaurant.

One day, when Leyton was serving dishes called Priddy Oggy and Liberated Eve, the village ironmonger mentioned that Mendip people had been eating snails for centuries. A local pensioner delivered 8 lb of snails, which he called "Wall fish", having enticed them down off drain pipes.

Eventually, Leyton had between five and six thousand snails growing every summer in a disused swimming pool in the garden. He cooked them in Somerset cider and Cheddar cheese, and served in their shells.

In 1977 Leyton sold up and retired for the last time, to the Isle of Wight.

He married, in 1939, Nancy Crinage, who died in 1993. They had four sons.

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Please get in touch if you have any questions or comments.