

VANDERSTEEL, William, of Alpine, NJ. Born Willem Dionys van Nijmegen Schonegevel in 1919 in Vlissingen, Netherlands. The middle child of an adventurous geologist and submariner, William grew up in Europe, Indonesia, South America, and Curacao. He attended Blair Academy and MIT, graduating in 1940 with a degree in aeronautical engineering. While processing his immigration at Ellis Island in 1943 he shortened his name to “Vandersteel” (unique in the world). When World War II started, William petitioned President Roosevelt to allow him to join the U.S. Army Air Corps, serving as a test pilot at Eglin Field. After the war, William took a job at General Motors in the 30-year advance styling division but was soon fired: his radical car design in which the four wheels are placed in a diamond configuration rather than a rectangle excited his colleagues more than his supervisor, Harley Earl. Later in life he returned to this project and had a prototype built, proving the concept’s stability properties.

After GM, he founded Ampower Corporation, which facilitated cross-border shipping and engineering. He later founded TubeXpress, which adapted and modernized the age-old idea of pneumatic tubes as a means to transport freight instead of long-haul trucks, improving highway safety. He lamented the lack of infrastructure investment required for TubeXpress, unwilling to pursue the opaque taxpayer subsidies that fund Elon Musk’s similar-concept HyperLoop.

He met his first wife, Betsey Rogers Stoddard while at Eglin Field. They had three children, Stoddard, Marion and Bill, raising them in Manhasset, Long Island, where he also started a business that advanced photo-on-metal signage. He honed his aeronautical skills by developing new wing designs in balsa wood plane models and building a hydrofoil that lifted a boat completely off the water.

William moved to Alpine in 1967 with his second wife, Norma Lee Benfield, and fathered two more children, Ann and Tina. The couple built a house he designed, complete with an unusual floating spiral staircase he engineered. The couple was active in the small town’s at-times rancorous political scene, always taking care to elevate facts over opinion. They had many friends and threw lively parties. William was also well loved at his local gym, where attendees admired the daily routine he held well into his 90s.

William never concerned himself with popular opinion or consensus; instead, he prided himself on the epistemological journeys that resulted from pursuing what ought to be, regardless of the subject. While at times infuriating to those happy enough with the world as it is, his focus and energy nonetheless inspired many, even those who vehemently disagreed with him. He was an early admirer of Ayn Rand’s philosophy of Objectivism, although he’d offer several improvements. He was a supporter of the Foundation for Economic Education and the Cato Institute, and several of his op-eds were published in newspapers and aired on television.

William died on August 18th in Jupiter, Florida. He is survived by his younger sister, five children and six grandchildren. A local memorial is planned in Alpine.