



## Martin J. Koomen

December 30, 1917 - July 25, 2017

Martin J. Koomen, Physicist, 99

Martin Koomen passed away at age 99 on July 25th shortly after medical staff at Green Springs Village (a retirement community in Virginia) found him unresponsive. He had been in declining health for some years.

Martin served as project scientist at the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington D.C. for more than half a century. His work centered around the space program of the '60s and '70s, but he is probably best known for his work on the Solwind Research team that discovered a comet colliding with the sun in 1979. Comet Howard–Koomen–Michels, formally known as C/1979 Q1 (SOLWIND), was a large sungrazer that collided with the sun on August 31, 1979. It is the only comet known to have made contact with the sun's surface, as most bodies vaporize before impact. It was observed by the white light coronagraph, SOLWIND, on the USAF Space Test Program, P78-1 satellite. It was the first comet discovered by a space instrument. The discovery was widely reported in Science Magazine, The New York Times, Time Life, and other media of the time.

Despite a demanding work life and frequent travel, he maintained a close-knit family life.

Martin Koomen was born December 30, 1917 to Grietje and Willem Koomen who had fled Holland in 1915, before of World War One.

The family eventually settled in Pittsford, New York. Martin and cousin Jacob completed college at The University of Rochester.

Martin married Nellie Faye Smith in 1946. Both had come to Washington to work in the war effort. He spoke little of his war service (most of it spent at a clandestine facility in Rochester, NY) except for his training at the submarine base in Groton, Connecticut.

Martin and Nellie settled in Fairfax, Virginia. They had two sons, Stephen, born in 1949, and William in 1953. They were church active and at son Stephen's suggestion, they became active in small boat sailing.

The decision to start sailing would change their lives forever. The family became active in an Alexandria, Virginia sailing organization. Vacations took them to Newport, Rhode Island, Camden and Bar Harbor, Maine. Most of the vacation time was spent at a lakeside in Maine cottage lent by close friends. In the 1970's Stephen, after service in the army, became a boat builder in Port Townsend, Washington. William entered college in Rochester, N.Y.

In 1977 Stephen died suddenly of leukemia.

Martin and family drew closer. They visited extended family frequently in Rochester, the Carolinas, Alabama, and Florida.

In 1983, Nellie was diagnosed with ovarian cancer; Martin served as her primary caregiver with hospice support. She died in 1985.

Martin eventually returned to work and an active life as a representative to the European Space Agency.

He delighted in spending time with nieces and nephews and, eventually, granddaughters.

Martin spent his last years in a Springfield, Virginia retirement community.

He is survived by his sister, Jennette of Pittsford, NY, son and daughter-in-law, William and Germaine of Newburyport, Massachusetts, and granddaughters, Emily of Newburyport, and Elise of Portland, Maine.

An August Memorial Service is planned.

# Tribute Wall



“ *Martin J. Koomen*

October 27, 2022 at 09:45 PM



“ *Martin J. Koomen*

**Vivid Recollections** - August 13, 2017 at 12:00 AM



“ *Martin J. Koomen*

**Summer's Light Bouquet** - August 12, 2017 at 12:00 AM