

Arles Cole, a World War II Navy veteran believed to be the Tulsa area's last living survivor of the Pearl Harbor attack, died Friday, Dec. 4, his family said. He was 96. Floral Haven Funeral Home in Broken Arrow is handling arrangements. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no visitation is planned. The graveside service will be family only, but for friends who would like to pay their respects, they can do so as part of a drive-by procession. Drivers will meet at 1:30 p.m. Thursday in the Korean Church of Tulsa parking lot, 1300 E. 68th St., then proceed at 2 p.m. to the gravesite across the street at Floral Haven. Cole's death came just three days before the 79th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. Over the years, he'd attended the annual commemoration in Hawaii a number of times. Cole, who was featured in the Tulsa World's Serving Our Country series and book, was a past president of Tulsa's Last Man's Club, a group of area Pearl Harbor survivors that once numbered a few dozen. As the survivors died, the club's numbers declined. Cole had been the last living member for more than a year, since the death of Lonnie Cook in 2019. Originally from the Porum area, Cole grew up on a family farm. He joined the Navy at 17 under a special program that allowed him early entry. He was trained in navigation, and chose service aboard the battleship USS West Virginia. In a previous interview, Cole recalled the morning of Dec. 7, 1941: Arising just before 8 a.m., he had walked out on the wing of the ship's navigation bridge. "I'm up there, stretching my arms, waking up, thinking about Sunday," Cole said. "All of a sudden, I see black smoke. Something was wrong on Ford Island." That something was the beginning of Japan's surprise attack. As it unfolded, the attack targeted U.S. Naval forces stationed at Pearl Harbor on Oahu. The West Virginia would be severely damaged, hit by seven torpedoes and two aerial bombs. Amid the chaos, Cole was almost trapped below decks, where he almost surely would've died, as many sailors did. But a Japanese bomb that crashed through

the main deck opened up an escape route. The West Virginia stayed afloat for a few hours as Cole joined in fighting the now-raging fires. Eventually, however, the order came to abandon it. Of the ship's more than 1,400 men, 70 died in or as a result of the attack. It was one of four battleships lost that day, along with the Arizona, California and Oklahoma. The attack drew the U.S. into WWII. Cole went on to serve on a mine sweeper, then the destroyer USS Prichett, aboard which he would take part in Pacific battles including at Okinawa in 1945. For years afterward, Cole did not talk about the war. But later in life, he opened up, making it his mission to keep the Pearl Harbor story alive. One of his proudest achievements was, as a member of the Last Man's Club, having a section of U.S. 169 renamed the Pearl Harbor Expressway. He also compiled the stories of more than 50 area survivors into a book for schools. Cole spoke to groups, and especially enjoyed speaking to youths. "I was given a very special gift, to be able to stay alive," Cole told the World once. He planned to "keep telling (the story)" as long as he was able, he added. Cole was preceded in death by his wife of 68 years, Virginia. Survivors include three children, James, Sandra and Scott; four grandchildren; and five great grandchildren. Memorial donations may be made to Folds of Honor or the Greatest Generation Foundation. Featured news video: Tulsa World Magazine's 2020 Tulsans of the Year Gallery: A look back at Tulsa World's Veterans Remember series Get local news delivered to your inbox! Subscribe to our Daily Headlines newsletter. Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.