

Oldest Bataan Death March survivor dies

SANTA FE (AP) — Manuel A. Armijo, a veteran of the World War II Bataan Death March who tended to fellow war prisoners through years of brutal captivity, has died. He was 92.

Family members said Armijo, considered the oldest living survivor of the ordeal, died Tuesday in Santa Fe. He will be buried Friday at the Santa Fe National Cemetery following funeral services at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church.

Armijo, of Santa Fe, and other survivors co-founded the Bataan Memorial Military Museum and Library in Santa Fe and started the annual white-flag surrender anniversary observances held every April 9 near the Capitol.

"His heroism and courage will set an example for New Mexicans for generations to come," Gov. Bill Richardson said

Wednesday through a spokesman.

Armijo's face and words are familiar to historians and others researching the Bataan Death March. He was interviewed for various documentaries and continued to organize the annual surrender observance through this past April, even as his health and vision declined.

He gave his last speech at this year's observance.

"God has been good to me and my family," he had said. "I'm a little over 92 years old. I'm blind, and I'm tired."

He was 29 when he deployed with the New Mexico National Guard in 1940. In August 1941, he visited home one last time before departing for the Philippines.

Thousands of U.S. and Filipino troops fought off the Japanese for four months

before U.S. Maj. Gen. Edward King ordered the surrender.

Soon after, Armijo and the other prisoners were forced to march 65 miles up the Bataan Peninsula without food, water or medical attention. Those who collapsed along the way were shot or bayoneted. Thousands more died in labor camps or on ships that transported the POWs to camps in Japan, Korea or China.

About 1,800 captives were from New Mexico. Fewer than 900 of them survived.

Because he had been appointed first sergeant in his company, Armijo took on the responsibilities of minding fellow prisoners. He repeatedly fought with Japanese captors and insisted on uniting the soldiers from New Mexico at one location.

Armijo finally returned home

in 1945, but the 3 1/2 years of captivity and forced labor stayed with him. He said he had nightmares and would wake up screaming.

Armijo spent most of his career in state government and was director of the state Veterans Service Commission from 1957 until 1966, when he retired. He was a member of numerous veterans organizations.

He is survived by his wife, Frances Armijo; son Fred Armijo and daughters Peggy Ruiz and Loretta Lithgow; nine grandchildren; five great-grandchildren; and numerous nieces, nephews and relatives.