

2—A ERIE, PA., MORNING NEWS, Monday, September 17, 1979



*NAILA, West Germany — Two East German families jammed together on a tiny platform made a daring escape to the West in this home-made hot air balloon whose glare illuminated the darkness. The balloon lies here tangled in the trees after making the 30-minute, 28-mile journey to safety.*

## 8 flee Reds in balloon

NAILA, West Germany (AP) — Eight East Germans, including four children, floated through the night skies over Germany and across the "death strip" border to the West on Sunday in a homemade hot-air balloon stitched together from bits of nylon and bedsheets.

The group, made up of two families each with two children, escaped in a 12-mile, 20-minute flight that ended in this Bavarian town six miles from the border. Their leader, airplane mechanic Peter Strelzek, told reporters they had prepared for the trip for two months, since they failed in their first attempt July 4.

Strelzek said they fled for political reasons, because "it was no longer possible for us to lie to our children and put up with the political conditions in East Germany."

It was believed to be the first time refugees had used a balloon to cross the closely patrolled border, which is strung with electrified fences and minefields.

During the flight, the children rode in the middle of the gondola, an 18-square-foot iron plate, and were huddled around bottles of gas used to fuel a fire that heated air in the 5,230-cubic-yard balloon. The adults rode on four iron rods projecting from the plate, each grabbing onto inch-thick ropes attaching the gondola to the balloon.

Strelzek, who said he was a civilian employee of the East German army, was accompanied by his wife, Doris, and two sons, Andreas, 11, and Frank, 15. The others were Andreas Wetzel, a brickmason, his wife, Petra, and two sons, aged 2 and 5 years, whose names were not immediately known.

Strelzek said the escape began about 1:30 a.m. near the East German town of Lobenstein when they filled the balloon with hot air. A half-hour later, with a light, northwest wind to push them westward, they took off, floating toward the border under starry skies at about 25 miles an hour, he said. They reached a maximum altitude of 8,000 feet, he said. The border runs east-west in the Lobenstein-Naila area.

The group was met by two West German police officers who had raced to the landing site, thinking they might be following a UFO.

"Are we in the West here?" one of the balloonists reportedly asked.

"We were convinced that we were in the West even before the police officers came because we saw a modern farm machine on the field unlike anything we have," Strelzek later told a reporter.

Two of the children were slightly injured during the landing. The group was examined at a local hospital and released.