



Members of two East German families demonstrate how they were packed together aboard their homemade balloon on flight to West.

Associated Press

## A Bedsheet Balloon Takes Eight to West

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 yesterday 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, Peter Strelzek, an airplane mechanic, 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.

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 Wetzels, 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 5,230-cubic-yard 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. They reached a maximum altitude of 8,000 feet, he said.

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 two 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.

Their July 4 escape attempt failed when their balloon went down about 220 yards short of the border, Strelzek said. He said the group returned home without being spotted by East German guards, and soon began patching together a new balloon.

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