

Balloon adventure has bigger surprise than expected

By Doug Funke
staff writer

A Troy lawyer who last week took part in a cross-country helium balloon race experienced even more than he thought possible.

"And Walter Noeske only 'flew' from Las Vegas to southeastern Arizona.

But during a period of 36 hours, Noeske and his ballooning partner, Gordon Boring of Plymouth:

- Battled unusual atmospheric/wind conditions.
- Last radio contact with their ground tracking team.
- Jettisoned most of their food and water.
- Landed in a restricted military target-shooting area.
- Walked more than 40 miles through rocky terrain and searing desert heat to safety.

"It was enjoyable," Noeske said matter-of-factly. "It certainly was not my expectation of a challenge, and I guess the only regret I have is it was a south-east heading."

Noeske's and Boring's adventure began 7:30 a.m. Nov. 14 when they left the twinkling lights of Las Vegas en route to what they hoped would be New Jersey.

IT ENDED at 7 p.m. the next day when the pair — sweaty, disheveled, thirsty and hungry — tapped on the door of a cotton mill in a desolate area of Arizona.

"We were hoping for an easterly heading," Noeske said. Winds, though, pushed them south, then west. Air pockets also forced their balloon into a bobbing movement. They climbed as

high as 13,000 feet.

The duo, fearful of drifting into Mexico or worse, the Gulf of California, decided to abandon the race and a potential prize of \$100,000 for a safe landing.

The fact that they had lost communication with their ground tracking crew, which included Paul Abbo, a Troy resident, and Judy Berke from Bloomfield Hills, also influenced their decision.

The pair first touched down within a couple hundred yards of what they thought was the Mexican border.

They threw out their drag line, picked up a north/northwest wind and traveled 10-15 miles per hour about three feet off the ground for 2 1/2 hours.

"THAT, in some respects, was the

spectacular part of the flight," Noeske said. "We turned our 300,000 candlepower light on and lit up the cactus. We would fly over them 25-30 feet over the ground, then back down."

"There was a half moon out," he continued. "It was totally silent. If someone had seen us, we probably looked like a UFO."

Noeske and Boring grounded the balloon for good when they seemed heading for a large, steep mountain. They released the helium and settled into the cramped gondola for a little sleep.

"We knew we were in a restricted area, but it was either that or Mexico," Boring said.

Abbo and Berke, meanwhile, became more and more concerned as time went on.

"We were looking in the sky for their strobe light," Abbo said. "In a small town (Dateland, Ariz.) I called the Phoenix Airport, the Tucson Airport and the Albuquerque Airport to see if they got them on radar or had made contact."

Abbo said he also contacted Luke Air Force Base, which had shut down its tower operations earlier in the evening, and the sheriff's department of three counties.

Tucson reported of an earlier contact, he said.

"I was on the phone until 3:30 a.m. I assumed they were down," he said.

BACK AT THE balloon, Boring and Noeske decided to search out help at sun up rather than wait for assistance to come to them.

They first walked about six miles west where they thought they had seen lights. When they reached a ridge and saw nothing but more sagebrush, they went back to the gondola and took a nap.

Shortly after noon, they set out again, this time heading due north. They reached the mill after trudging about 18 miles, Noeske said.

While walking, the pair saw planes in the distance dropping bombs and making practice runs, but they were never spotted, Noeske said.

When the military helped them reclaim their balloon after they reached safety, a did missile was sticking out of the ground less than 200 yards away, he added.

Several military aircraft aided in the search for the pair. However, military maneuvers continued in the area because four different ranges and several different bases were involved, Noeske speculated.

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