Launch was originally scheduled for the evening of October 7, 2006. Don Day, a meteorologist who worked with Cayton on numerous world record hot air flights as well as other gas flights, was located at the launch field in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In conference with Cayton and Knapp, Day determined that the weather would be a significant factor in the launch and in any subsequent flight track across the United States. The initial track for the planned launch date would have put the team on a northeasterly track towards Canada; but, low freezing levels and thunderstorms east of the Sandia Mountains forced race officials to delay the planned launch. The next launch window, Tuesday, October 10, showed a potential track east, paralleling Interstate 40.

During the 3-day weather delay, Cayton had reason to reevaluate some strategic issues regarding the flight. One concern was the fact that both he and Knapp were fairly large men; he felt that this might place them at some disadvantage over teams with smaller pilots. Smaller pilots are able to carry more ballast, and thus can extend their flight time. Also, while disappointed with the no-fly situation at the Gordon Bennett, he realized that this might provide an advantage, as he would not be attempting a second duration flight while still fatigued from the Gordon Bennett. Cayton believed that these two issues balanced out, and continued with Knapp to prepare for the launch.

Tuesday, October 10, arrived clear and cold; the cold front and low-pressure system that had delayed the initial launch had passed through the Albuquerque area and was now ahead of them. A massive cold front would push through Canada into the central United States and move to the Gulf of Mexico during the second day of flight. The plan was to stay between the two systems to remain competitive and safe. With crew chief Ken Draughn and help from competitors Peter Cuneo and Bert Padelt, the inflation went smoothly. *[Figure 11-12]*

Figure 11-12. *Inflation of the America's Challenge balloons, Albuquerque, NM, October 2006.*

As launch position had been previously drawn by lot, the Cayton-Knapp team was the fifth balloon to launch. Early on the evening of the 10th, Cayton handed two bags of ballast to the balloonmeister, Stefan Handl, and they were in the air. The race was on! Knapp remembers many "good luck" calls from the crowd; the chase crew mounted their vehicle and departed the launch field not knowing they would have a role in one of the most controversial events in years

Cayton-Knapp tracked more easterly than the balloons that had previously launched and stayed well north of highway I-40 as they crossed the Sandia Mountains. Their altitude was well above 10,000 feet the first night and averaged 30 miles per hour (mph) with the temperature in the low 30's. Cayton and Knapp spent most of the night colder than expected and shivering to keep warm. They established radio contact with Lubbock, Texas Approach at 0630 Wednesday morning and shortly after experienced the magic of a sunrise from the air.

Most of Wednesday was spent flying over Texas, averaging 36 mph. Another team, that of Phil McNutt and Brian Critelli, flew 90 degrees directly below them passing to the north just before they reached the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex. *[Figure 11-13]* Cayton-Knapp could see other balloons in the distance, but it was unusual to see another team's balloon so close in flight. Dallas Approach directed them to fly over the Class B airspace above 11,000 feet; at that altitude, they started tracking a more southerly direction.

Figure 11-13. *Dallas, Texas, from 11,000 feet, as seen from the Cayton-Knapp balloon in flight.*

Wednesday evening found the team over northern Louisiana. Most of the night was spent above 2,500 feet flying less than 12 mph. The strategy was to stay behind the weather system ahead and to position themselves for Thursday's flight. Cayton and Knapp fell behind several teams during the night, but that served to let them know they were where they needed to be.