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Friday, October 16, 2009 - default Edition - Edition: (RH)- Page: 1-A
The Flight that never was

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FORT COLLINS — For five hours Thursday, an awestruck world worried about a Fort Collins boy swept away in a helium balloon .

But in the end, 6-year-old Falcon Heene turned out to be just a scared child hiding in his parents' attic.

Falcon — believed to have been carried away and possibly dropped out of the homemade craft — had simply hidden in the attic and fallen asleep after an earlier scolding from his father.

“I’m really, really sorry I yelled at him,” said Falcon’s father, Richard Heene, at a press conference outside his home. Holding his recently found son in his arms, the father paused to wipe away tears and kiss Falcon on the head.

“He scared the heck out of us.”

The ordeal began about 11:20 Thursday morning, when reports came in to the Larimer County Sheriff’s Office about a boy who had been carried away in a silver helium balloon .

Earlier that day, Richard, a self-proclaimed amateur scientist, and his family had been experimenting with the flying-saucer-shaped craft in their backyard.

Somehow, the helium-filled balloon became untethered and took off into the sky.

Ten-year-old Brad Heene said he’d just seen his brother Falcon crawl inside a small battery compartment attached to the balloon. Falcon had been climbing inside the craft earlier that day, and his parents believed he was still inside when it flew away.

Carried by 25 mph gusting winds, the balloon drifted across Northern Colorado, heading southeast from the Heenes’ home on Fossil Creek Drive in southeast Fort Collins.

Just before 2 p.m., with TV news stations broadcasting the flight to the watching world, the craft landed softly in a field east of the Weld County town of Hudson after a journey of about 50 miles.

When officers arrived at the balloon, the boy was not inside.

Search and rescue teams were deployed along the entire path the balloon had traveled. Officials feared that Falcon had fallen out somewhere along the way.

However, as they searched for him at several sites, the 6-year-old suddenly appeared right in his own home.

He had been hiding in the attic the entire time — scared to face his family after his father scolded him earlier that day for climbing inside the craft.

“I was in the attic, and he scared me because he yelled at me,” Falcon said to the crowd of dozens of reporters outside his home.

“I didn’t want to come out very soon ... or else I would get in trouble.”

His parents, who were waiting at home for news, were shocked when Falcon suddenly appeared.

“Mayumi (Falcon’s mother) screamed that he came out of somewhere,” Richard said, later adding “When I first saw my son, my legs got weak.”

The youngest of three boys, Falcon has always been one to find his own space when he’s upset, Richard explained.

“If I scold him with a loud voice ... he kind of pouts. He walks away to find a place to call his own,” he said.

Richard thought he knew all the places the boy liked to hide, he said, and searched them all after Falcon went missing. However, the attic above the family’s garage must be a new one, he said.

Falcon explained that he’d hoisted himself through the rafters to his secret space after the scolding.

Once inside the attic, Falcon said he was oblivious to the commotion outside.

“I played and took a nap,” he said.

Yet while the boy slumbered, the world outside was frantically trying to find him and make sense of the bizarre event unfolding.

Story of the “balloon boy ” spread like wildfire on news outlets from ABC to Yahoo, and the world turned its eyes to the Colorado sky to watch the silver craft’s journey and the boy who might be inside.

The flying saucer, about 25 feet in diameter, was carried as high as 10,000 above the ground and swept in winds up to 25 mph.

However, any fairy tale ending to the event was dashed when the balloon landed and Falcon was not inside.

No could say what happened, but speculation ran rampant.

Did Falcon jump out as it lifted off the ground?

Was he ever even in it?

Some reporters wondered if the entire event was an elaborate hoax, coordinated by Falcon's parents.

The family has twice been featured on ABC's "Wife Swap" TV show, where Richard was portrayed, among other professions, as a filmmaker.

However, perhaps the most grim speculation was that the battery compartment that Falcon was believed to be in had fallen off during the craft's flight.

Officials said they analyzed photographs submitted by witnesses, focusing on black dots seen just below the balloon. Could these spots be a falling boy?

Sheriff Jim Alderden held a press conference about five hours into the ordeal.

After reviewing all the information, including confirming that Falcon's brother had seen him climb into the craft, the department was changing the search to a "recovery-type" operation, he said.

However, seconds later, phones began to buzz and ring during the press conference, including the sheriff's.

Alderden briefly walked away from the cameras and soon returned with a smile and the good news.

"He's been located. He's alive," the sheriff said. "He's at the house."

The news flooded through Fossil Ridge Drive, where everyone from reporters to neighbors yelled, "He's alive and at home!"

"Just joy and relief" was the only way the Heenes' neighbor, Marc Friedland, could describe his reaction to the news.

"I hadn't allowed myself to feel what could have been," he said. "Now it's a good ending, you can feel good."

About 4:45 p.m., the Heenes peeked out of their front door to face the crowd of reporters, cameras, neighbors and strangers.

Richard said all the family could feel was relief, as well as gratitude for everything the police and sheriff's departments had done.

"You guys are great," he said.

As for Falcon, the 6-year-old didn't seem at all fazed that the world's attention was focused on him.

After his parents set him down, he weaved through the sea of people and scampered off to play on the family's parked vehicles.

Falcon's parents said they won't punish their son after the events of the day.

"We don't ground our children," Richard said, "but we're going to talk to him."

And, Mayumi added, they're going to hold on to Falcon a little tighter than before.

"We don't want to lose him again," she said.

ON THE NET: Video from the incident is available at www.reporterherald.com/apextras.