

Cutthroat Peak- Cauthorn-Wilson Rappel Accident

April 28, 2024

Incident Summary:

On April 28th, a party of two climbed and then were descending the Cauthorn-Wilson route on Cutthroat Peak in the North Cascades of Washington State. The route is a seasonal ice route of WI4 difficulty. During the descent at approximately 8PM on the last rappel there was a rappel failure which caused one of the climbers to fall approximately 400 feet. About 120 feet down WI3+ terrain then another 260 feet down steep snow, coming to a rest at approximately 7200 feet of elevation in the snow. The other climber was left at the top of the last rappel with no ropes and no way of safely down climbing to the injured party (see appendix A). Both climbers had Garmin InReaches and were able to initiate SOS with the appropriate authorities.

Due to the fact that Cutthroat Peak is in the northern reaches of Chelan County, Chelan County Mountain Rescue (CCMR) was notified at approximately 2200 and a team of three was assembled and decided that due to deteriorating weather conditions, time was imperative and they should move through the night to reach the climbers and attempt to warm them and access the stuck climber. CCMR personnel left Wenatchee around 2340 and were at the trailhead and hiking into the climbers at 0245 on April 29th. The CCMR team of three was joined by two members of Okanogan County Search and Rescue (OCSAR) and arrived on scene with the fallen climber at approximately 0500.

More members of OCSAR and CCMR were dispatched to assist with a possible litter evacuation if NAS Whidbey Island was not able to hoist the injured climber. Two members of CCMR started to climb to the stuck climber at about 0545 and accessed them at 0700. The CCMR and OSRA team with the fallen climber were able to stabilize the injuries and warm the patient using sleeping bags, "chem kits", food, water and shelter. The two CCMR climbers were able to lower the stuck climber and get them down to the other team members to be warmed. Around 1020 the weather cleared well enough that NASWI was able to conduct a successful hoist of the injured climber. All rescuers were able to hike out.

Occurrence Time and Date: April 28th, 2000

Time Reported to 911: 2100

Response time: 0245 rescue team left trailhead arriving at 0500 at patients

Location: 48.526960, -120.700763 Cutthroat Peak- Cauthorn-Wilson

Number in party: 2

Weather: Mostly cloudy at the time of the accident. During the night the location got about two-three inches of snow with temps in the low 20s, light west wind.

Knowns & Unknowns

In this case both climbers lived but there are still several unknowns. We know that there was some sort of failure at the anchor that caused the first climber to fall almost as soon as they weighted the ropes and started rappelling. The anchor itself was three pitons connected by a 6mm cord. Attached to the 6MM cord was a rappel ring. The climbers were using twin ropes and the ropes were threaded through the rappel ring. There did not appear to be any cord or gear failure at the anchor itself which the stuck climber was attached to (see appendix B,C & D). The rappel ring was attached to the ropes at the bottom of the climb with the fallen climber (ropes were threaded through the ring) with no evidence of broken slings or cordage.

Hypothesis

Due to the fact that the ropes were threaded through the rappel ring, there was no obvious anchor failure, the rappel ring was still on the ropes at the bottom and that the failure occurred right away as the climber weighted the system (on steep snow) it is believed that the rappel ring was not tied to the anchor cord but was girth hitched to the cord. It is believed that the climbers grabbed the “wrong side” of the rappel ring which caused it to rotate out of the 6mm cord and detach (Appendix E,F &G). It is believed that the cord was lightly frozen (morning sun and afternoon shade on that portion of the route) and that the climbers were in a hurry to get down and did not notice that the girth hitch had “flipped” when they were feeding their ropes.

Analysis

Using girth hitches on anchors is becoming more and more common. Climbers should properly inspect their anchors and make sure that whatever they are rappelling off of is appropriate. More and more accidents are occurring from bad rappel slings and the trend of girth hitching rings and carabiners is adding another point of inspection/consideration. We still recommend cutting off old bad tat if you leave new tat (leave tat take tat) and that you tie in any rappel rings or better yet use a locker in place of rappel rings. Pear shaped carabiners have less of a chance of “rolling” in the cord than rappel rings.

Either Way climbers should realize that girth hitching is becoming more common and a point to be aware of when rappelling any route and that even established rappel rings can come loose when girth hitched. Also, the rappel should always be properly weight tested before you come off of your personal anchor system.

Appendix A- Stuck climber circled in red



Appendix B- Anchor overview (slings added later)



Appendix C- Left leg zoom in, 2 pins



Appendix D- right leg zoom in- 1 pin



Appendix E- Properly girth hitched rappel ring



Appendix F- threading the rope through the bottom of the rappel ring in this orientation would cause the 6MM cord to slip off of the rappel ring.



Appendix G-

