

# **Climbing Accident Report**

North Early Winters Spire Early Winters Couloir, AI 2-3, M4+ May 10, 2025

On May 10th, 2025, four climbers attempted to climb North Early Winters Spire via the 1,100ft Early Winters Couloir route. Upon descent, a catastrophic rappel anchor failure caused all four climbers to fall, resulting in the tragic death of three climbers. One climber suffered significant traumatic injuries requiring hospitalization. The purpose of this report is to provide a factual summary and analysis of this heartbreaking climbing accident.

## **Route Overview**

North Early Winters Spires is a 7,760ft granite spire near Washington Pass, and is within the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. Unlike the alpine rock climbing routes on the spires at Washington Pass which become popular once free of snow, the Early Winters Couloir (EWC) route is a mixed snow, rock, and ice route which is rated AI 2-3, M4+.

The route is accessed from the hairpin curve of WA State Route 20, 1mi southeast of Washington Pass. Climbers travel over snow up Spire Gully, then traverse north towards a ramp of 40-degree steep snow. Starting at the top of this ramp of snow, five pitches of technical climbing ascends a couloir over snow, ice, and rock to reach the col between North and South Early Winters Spires. The final pitch of the route ascends from the col to the summit of North Early Winters Spire on rock via its south face.

After completing the route, climbers typically descend off of North Early Winter Spire to the west, using one of two descent routes, each with established rappel anchor stations. One of these routes descends from the col to the west, down Chockstone Gully. There are no established rappel anchor stations descending back down the EWC to the east.

### **Summary of Events**

Beginning at 6:10am from the SR20 harpin curve, the team of four climbers successfully climbed the approach and couloir portion of the route. They climbed as two rope teams, with each team carrying a rack of cams and nuts. Conditions involved soft snow and wet rock.

After over 11 hours on the move, the team decided to turn around without completing the final rock pitch to the summit, based on factors including deteriorating weather and waning daylight. It was evening, the climbing had taken longer than anticipated, and it had started to snow. One climber did not have an adequate jacket and was getting cold. At their turn around time of 1730, they sent an InReach message to a friend who had previously planned to join for the climb. The location of the InReach message as well as the surviving climber's recount suggest that the team had reached the col at top of the couloir.

The team descended using a series of rappels using two 60-meter ropes. Unlike the ascent where the four climbers operated as two rope teams, they descended as a single team of four. These rappels used a combination of fixed anchors and the team's rock protection for anchors. The first rappel anchor involved a rock feature slung by the team's sling and a carabiner. The second rappel anchor was composed of the team's nuts and a nylon sling, which they left behind. The third rappel anchor involved a preexisting piton and a bolt.

While staging at the second and third rappel anchor, the team added a picket snow anchor which would have provided more space for climbers to tether into the anchor while waiting their turn to rappel. They removed the picket placements before the last climber began these rappels to retain their snow picket.

On the third rappel, Climber 1 descended first, but was unable to locate adequate rock to build another rappel anchor. Climber 2 descended to Climber 1. Then Climber 3 rappelled down the opposite side of the couloir to look for a better anchor location. Climber 3 found a single fixed piton, but was unable to place any other rock protection. Climber 4 then descended to Climbers 1 and 2. Climbers 1, 2, and 4 then crossed the gully towards Climber 3, using the ropes as a hand-line and tethered with a prusik hitch.

Once regrouped at the piton, all four climbers clipped into two slings which were attached to the single piton. They then attached their two ropes to the piton with a locking carabiner for the fourth and final rappel to reach the snow ramp below the EWC. No additional rock anchors were available at the location of the piton, and the snow in that location was not suitable for a snow picket anchor. According to the survivor's recount, the team did not discuss the adequacy of the piton as a single anchor point.

Climber 3 began to rappel, and after a few seconds, the piton anchor failed by pulling out of the rock, causing all four climbers to fall. It is estimated that the team fell between 100-200ft before reaching the ramp of snow, then fell an additional 400-500ft down the steep snow and rock slope before coming to rest just below treeline at an elevation of 6,148ft.

The only survivor of the fall, Climber 4, recounts unsuccessfully attempting to self arrest using an ice tool, before losing consciousness for multiple hours. Upon regaining consciousness, the surviving climber reports having located two of their partners, deceased. They reported not being able to locate their third partner. Their headlamp was lost during the fall. There are no solid indicators as to how Climber 4 survived the fall, as Climbers 1, 2, and 4 all fell from the same height and were attached to the piton similarly. They briefly looked for the team's InReach, but were not able to locate it, assuming it had been lost in the fall. They then self-evacuated in the dark with no light source. The surviving climber drove west on Highway 20, reaching Newhalem, WA on the morning of May 11th, where they placed a phone call to report the accident.

Emergency responders from Okanogan County Search and Rescue, US Forest Service, and Winthrop Marshal's Office responded to the incident. After responders successfully located all three deceased subjects, a helicopter from Snohomish County Sheriff's Office transported the fallen climbers to the base of the mountain to the Okanogan County Coroner.

# Analysis of Factors Not Solely Responsible for the Fall

#### **Climbing Experience**

Little is known about the team's specific climbing experience, technical abilities, knowledge of route conditions, or risk tolerance. An interview with the surviving climber indicates everyone on the team had climbing experience, but that none of the climbers had a high level of experience with this genre of mixed snow/ice/rock alpine climbing. The interview also indicates that two of the climbers, likely Climbers 1 and 3, had a somewhat higher level of experience and leadership. One of the deceased climbers wore alpine touring ski boots, while others wore purpose-built alpine climbing boots, also indicating that the team had mixed experience levels with this specific genre of alpine climbing. The surviving climber shared that they did not have any previous experience with this genre of alpine climbing. The team likely did have experience with use of improvised rappel anchors, as this is not specific to mixed snow/ice/rock climbing.

#### Equipment

The climbers appeared to be reasonably equipped for the intended route with modern equipment tailored to this specific climbing objective including technical ice tools and crampons, a rack of rock protection (cams, nuts), and at least one ice screw and two snow pickets. The team carried two 60-meter ropes, each 8.5mm and triple-rated for use in single, half, or twin rope configurations. All four climbers wore helmets.

#### Group Size and Climbing Speed

On a route with objective hazards such as Early Winters Couloir, four climbers is considered a large group size. As the number of climbers increases, so too does potential for dislodging snow, rock, or ice. Larger groups tend to move more slowly, leading to longer exposure to hazards, and causing the team to not finish ahead of weather, waning daylight, or deteriorating conditions.

#### Weather and Conditions

Because this route relies on firm snow and preferably ice to be climbed with relative safety, it is most commonly attempted in very early spring, or occasionally early winter after the first snows of the season. The climbing guidebook for the area suggests, "This route should never be attempted during warm temperatures or times of high avalanche danger. It's mandatory that the freezing level is staying below 5,000ft for this route to be safely attempted." (Nicholson, 2012)

There is a weather station 1.5 miles north of the climbing route at 6,680', an elevation that is representative of the bottom of the couloir. At 3pm on the day before the accident, this weather station recorded a high temperature of 53-degrees F. The temperatures were 40-45F for the duration of the climb. At the time the party decided to descend, the most recent below-freezing temperature was recorded 55 hours prior on the morning of May 8th. Temperatures dropped below 40F after the team began descending. On this type of route, warm temperatures can increase the risk of avalanches, cornice fall, and can reduce the availability of sound snow and ice anchors.

While it is unknown whether the team attempted this route in marginal conditions intentionally or unknowingly, they did carry equipment to build a v-thread ice anchor, suggesting they may have expected to find solid ice. In good ice conditions a v-thread is an adequately strong rappel anchor. Given the conditions on May 10th, it is unlikely that suitable ice for such an anchor would have been available, so ice conditions ultimately did not play a direct role in the fall.

## **Cause of Fall: Piton Anchor Failure**

On May 11th, first responders identified a single angle piton which was clipped to the team's rappel ropes with a locking carabiner. Consistent with the surviving climbers description of the 4th rappel anchor as a single point piton anchor, no other anchor point pieces were found attached to the rope. The piton left in place by a previous party showed moderate amounts of rust, but did not break. The age of the piton is unknown, but appears to be more recent than the 1978 first ascent of EWC.

The carabiner which attached the piton to the rope was found to be unlocked. It may have come unlocked during the fall, or possibly was never locked. However because it remained attached to both the rope and piton, the status of the locking mechanism appears to be of no consequence to this accident.

While discussion below will analyze contributing factors and anchor alternatives, the mechanical cause of the fall was simply a pull-out failure of a single piton anchor, with no backup anchor-points in place.

#### Discussion

Most rappel anchors, either established or improvised, employ two or more anchor points to provide redundancy. Because rock quality, placement error, or weathering can contribute towards a weaker than intended anchor point, single point anchors are rarely trusted. In unusually desperate circumstances where a single point anchor must be used, it is critical that it is carefully assessed and that only one climber at a time is subject to consequence, should it fail. If familiar with placing pitons, climbers can use the hammer on the back of an ice tool to check or reset a piton placement. However it is still preferable to find additional anchor points rather than trust in a single anchor point, even after assessment.

The second and third anchors utilized more than one piece of protection, suggesting that the team did prefer to use redundant anchors. The successful use of old fixed anchors on these higher rappels may have contributed towards confidence in the strength of the fourth anchor's piton. The final fixed anchor (piton) was not backed up.

We also know that the team attempted to locate other anchor points prior to trusting the single piton. The surviving climber recounts that there were no cracks which would accept rock protection near the piton, and that the snow near the piton was unsuitable for a picket. Clearly, if the team were to use the piton, it would have to be a single point anchor. Had they exhausted their options? Could the team have built a strong and redundant anchor in a different location, without incorporating the piton at all?

It is common for a climber looking for a rappel anchor to focus on options available near the end of their rappel rope in order to utilize the full length of their ropes in order to reduce the total number of rappels needed. However when Climber 1 was unable to find an anchor near the end of their rappel, Climbers 2, 3, or 4 would have been able to search for options above Climber 1 during their descent. It is very likely that adequate rock protection, snow picket placements, or other snow anchors such as a deadman anchor would have been available somewhere within this 60-meter length of the couloir. If an anchor location was found somewhere above Climber 1, it would have required Climber 1 to ascend to that location, which would have added time to the descent. Using a higher anchor location could have also necessitated an additional rappel in order to complete the descent, further increasing descent time. It is unknown to what extent the team considered forgoing the piton and searching the full 60m length of the couloir for strong and redundant anchor locations.

Finally, if no suitable anchor could be located in the 60m below the third anchor, rigging a 120m single-strand rappel using both ropes may have reached the snow ramp from the third anchor without using a fourth rappel anchor. This would have required passing the bend used to join the ropes, and both ropes would have needed to be left on the mountain.

Among other mountain accidents, decision making mistakes frequently involve a heuristic trap known as the expert halo. If a team has a leader, either stated or implied, it can be somewhat less likely that other teammates will question a leader's decision, action, or inaction. The less experienced Climber 4 stated that they had assumed that Climber 3 had assessed the single piton on the fourth rappel, and that no discussion occurred to bring the single-point anchor into question. It is otherwise unknown to what extent the expert halo cognitive bias may have contributed towards the team's decision to use the single piton as their final rappel anchor.

Another trend in mountain accidents is the occurrence of errors late in the day. By the time the team was setting up the fourth rappel, they had been on the move for over 12-hours. Both physical fatigue and decision fatigue may have been contributing factors. Additionally, the fall likely occurred shortly before sunset. A sense of urgency to complete the rappels prior to darkness may have contributed towards non-consideration of other, more time consuming anchor options. And while deteriorating weather was stated as a contributing factor in the decision to descend, also possibly contributing towards a sense of urgency, no significant storm arrived on the night of May 10th.

There are two standard descent routes off of North Early Winters Spire. One standard descent route requires reaching the summit. The other standard descent route only requires reaching the col between the North and South spire. Descending EWC is not considered a standard descent route as there are no established rappel anchors, only remnants from previous teams' retreat. According to the guidebook, "There are no fixed anchors in the East Couloir and you wouldn't want to be in there if it's snowing hard or warming up. Once the notch (col) is gained, you can rappel down on fixed anchors to the west and hike back around to the hairpin." (Nicholson, 2012). Climber 4 told the Okanogan County Search and Rescue Coordinator that two days before the climb, the team decided to descend the EWC, although they were aware of the other descent options.

This report was prepared by the US Forest Service in collaboration with Okanogan County Search and Rescue for the Okanogan County Sheriff's Office. We offer our sincerest condolences to all those affected by this tragic loss of life.





[Accident Report Images Below]





5-10-25 Climbing Accident Report Image 3





# 5-10-25 Climbing Accident Report Image 5



[End of Accident Report]