



Peter Robertson set the record for number of climbs in one day at the St. Augustine Lighthouse Tuesday with 40 climbs.

Kimeko McCoy
St. Augustine Record

70-year-old establishes a record for climbing

Robertson climbs St. Augustine Lighthouse 40 times in a day

By Laura Hampton
The St. Augustine Record

St. Augustine lawyer Peter Robertson wished for one thing on his 70th birthday — the stamina to climb the St. Augustine Lighthouse. Not once, but 40 times.

After hearing the current record number of climbs in one day was 28, Robertson was determined not only to break it, but to smash it.

"It's an unofficial record," said Shannon O'Neil, spokeswoman for the St. Augustine Lighthouse & Museum. "A staff member climbed the lighthouse 28 times. He bet another staff member that he could do it."

The wager: A free pizza once a month for six months.

A 3rd Force Reconnaissance Marine in Vietnam, Robertson is accustomed to taking on tough challenges. But when it came to breaking the lighthouse record, he didn't know what he was getting into.

"If I knew then what I know now, I'm not sure I would have done it," Robertson said.

What Robertson knows now is setting the record meant overcoming some surprising hurdles.

"The first stage was, how do you control your heart rate?"

Robertson's son, who is the chief resident of an emergency room in Charlotte, N.C., supported the use of a heart monitor.

Everyone has a maximum heart rate, Robertson said. When he started training for the climb his heart rate was getting up to 150.

"My son said, 'You've got to get it down to 120; 150 is way too dangerous.'"

With the help of fellow Marine and personal trainer Luis Herrera, Robertson learned breathing techniques that helped get his heart rate down.

Then came the second hurdle: conditioning the legs to make multiple trips up and down 219 steps.

Unlike gym-type climbing equipment such as the Stairmaster, the lighthouse steps do not move.

"I weigh 180 pounds," Robertson said. "When I take a step, I have 180 pounds on my right leg. Then I take another step, and I've got 180 pounds on my left leg. It's like thousands of one leg squats."

Over the course of a few months, Robertson was able to build his leg strength. He did it slowly and with determination, climbing a couple of times a week.

And then came hurdle No. 3.

"When I got up around 18 to 20 climbs, I went hypoglycemic," he said. "You get dizzy; you get lightheaded; you start shaking. You're at an enormous calorie deficit."

Nutritionists figured he was burning about 1,200 calories an hour.

"I make sure he eats right and keeps up with his sugar levels," Herrera said.

During the climb, Herrera recommended taking in 900 calories an hour, which included liquid glycogen, Pedialyte, and peanut butter and honey sandwiches on Wonder bread.

It requires a lot of energy to climb 8,760 steps, which O'Neil said was the equivalent of climbing a 560-story building or the Empire State Building 5½ times.

At 4:08 p.m. on Tuesday, Robertson achieved his goal of climbing the lighthouse steps 40 times.

His reward was not pizza, however. Robertson decided about a month ago to collect money from local businesses for each leg of his climb; 100 percent of the proceeds will go to the Hope for Haiti Foundation, a well-established orphanage in Haiti.

"I think that's the neatest part of the story," Robertson said.