

## REPELLING FROM THE BOB KERRY PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE

Bob Kerry, the state senator from Nebraska, secured 18 million dollars funding for a pedestrian bridge spanning the Missouri River to connect the Omaha River Front to the Tom Hanafan Park in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Ground breaking occurred in October, 2006 and the bridge was opened for use in September, 2008. The length of the bridge is 3,000 feet and it has a river clearance of about 60 feet.

I have always had a keen interest in the bridge. In the earliest days of construction we (my wife and I) followed its progress, looking forward to the completion. We were not at the official opening, however, soon after, we walked the bridge.

Over the years we have enjoyed the bridge on various occasions. Frequently we ride our bikes over the bridge enroute to the Tastee Freeze on the other side of the Wabash Trail head in Council Bluffs, Iowa. We have enjoyed fireworks from the bridge. Once after a crazy New Year's Eve party we staggered over the bridge heading for our car. We have ridden Limes over the bridge only to find out that they have range limits (half way over the bridge).

Yes, we have enjoyed the bridge, probably more than most.

I'm not sure when I first got the idea to do a repel, but it was soon after the bridge's completion. For years I pondered over just how to do it. Not the repel itself, but for the logistics of the activity. Originally I thought that I would need someone in a boat, hovering in the water below me to repel into. But, you guessed it, I could find no one with a boat willing to do the deed. I kept getting, "Isn't that illegal?" as an excuse. The repel plan sort of went to the back burner for years.

Fast forward to 2025. I was standing on the bridge with our son, Joe, and was telling him that I was now 74 (years old), and if I didn't repel off of the bridge soon I would be too old to do it. I went on to tell him of my issues of getting a person with a boat to catch me (he had heard the story many times before). Then Joe calmly and nonchalantly said, "why don't you just repel off of the bridge into the water and then swim to shore?"

**My jaw dropped.** I had never thought of that! How creative (Joe is an extremely creative person). That was on April 4, 2025. My mind went into overdrive. I no longer had an excuse to **NOT REPEL THE BRIDGE.**

My background: I have been a climber for many (off and on) years. I have done climbing competitions, have climbed outside numerous times, have ice climbed in Ouray, Colorado, etc. Joe and I have climbed in scores of places including Alaska, Antarctica and Europe. I am more than a beginner. I have repelled numerous times, but never into water. It was to be a new experience for me.

Preparations went into high gear. I am a planning person. I put together a list of activities and materials that I would need. The actual activity list that I used is attached.

**The Repel:** I hadn't repelled for some time. I had to ask Joe how to set up my belay device for repel. I started practicing the art of repelling from the climbing wall at Lifetime Fitness. At first I repelled from the auto belay route. I progressed to repelling from the "arch" which was more open. At first my repeals were shaky and not smooth at all. Then, after much practice, the repels became easier to do, more smooth and efficient. I got fluent and comfortable with my repels. The arch where I practiced my repels from at Lifetime Fitness is about 30 foot high. The Bob Kerry Bridge height above water is about 60 feet. I was good with the difference, it didn't bother me. I just knew that, on the repel day, I would be repelling for about twice as long as I was repelling in practice at the climbing wall.

**The Rope Toss:** After studying the bridge for repel anchors I concluded that the best anchor would be the handrail. The handrails are designed with a top bar, a space and then a mesh area. This space was where my repel rope would go through. Every 4th vertical handrail support was a double. I now knew where my repel rope must go. Between the top bar and the mesh screen at a double vertical. Next I fabricated (from wood) a model handrail which replicated the actual bridge handrail. I attached this fabricated model handrail to my deck. Over the next 4 months I would practice throwing the rope through the opening in my model and out into my backyard, many times.

I bought a climbing rope 200 feet long. The bridge height above the water was reported to be 60 feet. I cut my rope to a length of 134 feet. That allowed for 67 feet on each side of the handrail support. That length allowed 7 feet for the distance from the bottom of the bridge to the handrail support. Two factors that I did not take into consideration were: 1) the change in river water elevation (with seasonal rains / droughts and 2) the stretch of the rope.

As I practiced throwing the rope through the model handrail I encountered a problem / concern. About every 5 to 8 throws a kink, bind or knot would develop. That would absolutely not do. Anyone who has ever repelled knows that the slightest knot, bind or kink STOPS a repel. I could only imagine being 50 foot up off the water and my repel rope bound up. I had to resolve this issue!

I searched online. I found out that climbers, tree trimmers and sailors all use the same method of coiling their rope, to avoid the kinking, or binding problem. They coil their ropes using a figure eight configuration. I studied their method. Then I started coiling my rope the same way they did. I threw my coiled rope through the opening in my model. I threw it fifty times in a row without a single bind, kink or knot. I considered the problem resolved.

**The Swim:** I am a fairly strong swimmer. I have done various swims including half ironman races where you swim 1.2 miles. Even though I have stopped doing open water swims, I have continued to swim several times per week at Lifetime Fitness. It is good aerobic exercise for me. However, I could not trust myself in the river. I didn't feel comfortable with free swimming across the river. SO, I got a high end life jacket and made sure that the fit was perfect.

At first I practiced swimming with both my life jacket and climbing harness on in the pool at Lifetime Fitness. Based on my swim rate (with the life jacket and climbing harness on) and the river water flow rate (5 to 7 miles per hour) I calculated how far down the river I would go after the repel. I hoped not to have to float all the way down to the casinos.

I progressed to doing swims at Blue Lake. And finally I moved on to the river itself.

The Missouri River around the Bob Kerry bridge has very high banks with a strong stand of tangled under growth. The only access to the river on the Nebraska side are the trails leading to homeless shelters on the river edge. These homeless shelters are sometimes occupied and sometimes not. Escape on the Iowa side was to be on paths cut in the bank by fishermen who fish on the river.

There is a significant difference in the river water level and flow rate in the spring/early summer and in the fall.

I did two actual swims on the river. I found that I could get across the river a lot faster than my calculations predicted. A good thing.

Also, I established that the least populated time on the bridge was 2 o'clock in the afternoon. So I set my sights on doing the repel at 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

On the onset my wife was adamantly, completely and totally against the repel thing. The reason not being a concern for my safety, but for the fact that it is illegal and I would be in big trouble if caught and she may even be implicated. But, being the good wife that she is, went along with all aspects of the repel thing, at least from a distance.

Then things started to change. After the 2 swims in the river it became clear to us that we were vastly overthinking the potential for getting in trouble.

During the first swim in the river, only one person, a fisherman, commented to me. As I swam up to his boat he said, "Oh, swimming in the river?" I said, "Yea, I do it all the time." He then said, "Be careful of my line, don't run into the hook." I just swam away. I got to the shore, climbed up the bank and walked to my truck. I saw absolutely no one around. No one!

The second swim in the river was very similar to the first one, no one around. It was 2 o'clock in the afternoon. The only interface that I had was with a few ducks swimming

in the river. They just looked at me and probably thought, what, on earth, is that human doing swimming across the river?

At 2 o'clock in the afternoon there were only several people on the bridge. My wife and I began to think that maybe this thing wasn't so risky (legally) after all.

During the repel my wife's job was to be the photographer. Originally, we thought that she would be stationed at the far end of the bridge, on the ground where I would appear only as a small image. But after the two swims and river exits we changed that.

The new photo plan was that she would walk on the bridge from the Nebraska side as I walked on the bridge from the Iowa side. As I came to the planned bridge exit point she would video the whole thing at close range. Then, as I entered the water and swam to the shore she would return to her car. We would rendezvous at our house.

**Repel Attempt 1:** It had always been my plan that if anything went wrong I would stop, back out, go home, regroup and try again at some later point. Something did go wrong on my first attempt.

Walking onto the bridge, life jacket and climbing harness on with the rope slung over my shoulder I encountered only 2 people. One asked me if I was climbing something and the other person totally ignored me. Neither person had any interest whatsoever in me or what I was doing. It was crazy!

As I came to my repel point I dropped my ropes and cut off the tie wraps holding the rope coils. The next step was to throw the rope coils through the hand rail opening and out to the river. I had practiced this action many times before on my handrail model on my deck.

But as destiny would have it I made a mistake. I threw the first coil through the handrail opening and out to the river (correctly). However, I threw the second coil OVER the top of the handrail and into the river. This would not work. I recognized the error immediately.

This was an ABORT. I pulled the rope back onto the bridge and put it in a pile. The repel was off, but since I was there I thought that I would practice jumping over the hand rail and tying off via my safety lanyard. I did that and while I was on the far side of the hand rail I, kind of, got the feel of being there. It felt comfortable. I also looked down and studied the river. It looked tame. Even though the effort was an ABORT, I gained a considerable amount of confidence. I would be ready for attempt 2.

During the repel attempt only 2 people passed us on the bridge. Neither had the slightest interest in what ever we were doing. It was crazy. It gave my wife self assurance that being the official photographer carried very little to no risk of anything with it, legal or other wise.

**Repel Attempt 2:** The next day, I was ready to go. Mary had lunch with her friends, but was back home by 12:30. We left for the Bob Kerry at about 12:45.

As per the previous attempt Mary parked on the Nebraska side and I parked on the Iowa side. I called her and verified that she was on the move. I had my climbing harness and life jacket on and my repel rope was coiled over my shoulder. I was, likewise, on the move.

This was Friday afternoon and there were quite a few people on the bridge. Far more than on our previous attempt. But the biggest concern was a group of about 10 people drinking and horsing around very close to where I was going to exit the bridge. That was not going to work. I felt that if they saw me go over the bridge rail they would get pretty excited. They were very loud and I wanted NO attention drawn to my repel. So Mary and I stood there and waited.

It seemed odd that we could stand there, me in my repel get up including a rope slung over my shoulder and absolutely no one was concerned or even curious as to our intentions. Mary wanted to abort. However, I wanted to stay for at least 15 to 20 minutes for the group to move on.

After about 20 minutes the group moved on. When they were out of sight I went into action. I clipped the wire ties off of my repel rope. Next I hurled the two sides of the rope through the opening in the hand rail. Unlike on the previous attempt both sides of the rope landed in the right location. Next I catapulted myself over the hand rail and attached my safety lanyard. I leaned over the I-beam and checked how the repel rope landed in the water and I verified that there were no tangles or knots in the rope. All was good.

I attached my repel rope to my belay device on my harness. Then I checked it to see that it had been attached correctly and that it was ready to support my weight. All was now a go and I unclipped my safety lanyard (from the bridge fence) and clipped it to my harness (out of the way).

I leaned back over the I-beam and let the repel equipment do its job. As I descended I looked down at the end of the repel rope. It was above the water line which meant that at the end of the repel I would drop into the water. Was not a big concern.

The repel went smoothly. I worked my self all the way down to the end of my repel rope which then dropped me into the water.

Originally I had planned on pulling the repel rope through the anchor on the bridge and letting it fall in the water and float away. The cost of the repel rope (about \$200.00) would just be a cost of the adventure. However, earlier in the day Mary and I decided that it was best to leave the repel rope anchored to the bridge. So I did. It remained there while I swam across the river. It may still be there?

Once in the water I rolled over to my front and started breaststroking. I had practiced this movement previously. I was now in the “get to the shore” mode.

I paddled to the shore. All went smoothly. The total time expired was less than 14 minutes! I climbed up the shore ridge via a fisherman’s path. I proceeded to the grassy area of Hanafan Park. I walked toward my truck. NO one was around.

A few minutes later when I arrived at my truck Mary called me and congratulated me on my success. I took off my wet climbing harness, life preserver and muddy shoes.

I then drove home. It was around 2:35 on Friday, September 19, 2025. The long-time desire to repel from the Bob Kerry bridge had been completed successfully without a single glitch.

kent irwin