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*Billy Mills a member of the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) Tribe and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Gold Medalist for the 10,000 meter run, visited Carlisle Barracks Oct. 7. One of his stops was the Jim Thorpe Gym, named in honor of the only other Native American Olympic Gold Medalist.*

Carlisle Barracks hosted one of only two Native Americans to win an Olympic gold medal who came here to honor the memory of a man he considered “almost god-like,” Jim Thorpe.

Billy Mills, a member of the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) Tribe and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Gold Medalist for the 10,000 meter run, visited Carlisle Barracks Oct. 7 to walk the grounds that Thorpe, a student of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, once called home.

“Jim Thorpe was like a god to me growing up,” said Mills, who was raised on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and attended the Haskell Institute, now known as the Haskell Indian Nations University. “I couldn’t relate to him as he seemed larger than life. Even after winning the gold medal he said that he can’t bring himself to compare himself to Thorpe.

Considered by historians as one of the biggest upset in Olympic history, his victory in the 10,000 meters at the 1964 Olympic Games saw him weave through a field of lapped runners and finally passed the race favorites, Ron Clarke and Mohamed Gammoudi. Mills took up distance running while attending the Haskell Institute and at the University of Kansas under Hall of Fame coach Bill Easton, he was an All-American in cross country in both 1958 and 1959. A 1984 movie titled "Running Brave" was made of his life. Mills was elected to the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame in 1984.

While here, Mills visited Indian Field, the site of many of Thorpe and the other athletes of the schools legendary accomplishments, and walked through the gym that bears his hero's name.

"It's amazing to be here and think of all of the accomplishments of Jim Thorpe and his teammates," said Mills. It was the first time that Mills had visited Carlisle Barracks.

In addition to his athletic prowess, Mills is also a Marine Corps veteran and spoke about why he chose to serve.

"Myself and many native people have very strong impulse to belong and serve two nations," he said. "I wanted to honor myself, my tribal nation and my country by serving." His given native name, Makata Taka Hela, loosely means "love your country."

Mills now heads a non-profit group "Running Strong for American Indian Youth, in addition to being an advocate for Native American communities.

"We aim to help American Indian people fulfill their basic needs -food, water, and shelter- while also helping their communities gain self-sufficiency and self-esteem," he said. Mills and the group was recognized in 2012 by President Barack Obama with the Presidential Citizens Medal for their work.

Mills was in town taking part in a Cumberland County Historical Society conference that focused on the athletic legacy of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.