



Eleven years after hitting rock bottom, Master Sgt. Matthew W. Rouse walked through the doors of the Sergeants Major Academy. As he stood in line, one thought dominated his mind: How did someone like me end up here? The answer: leadership. (U.S. Army photo)

Leadership Matters

By Master Sgt. Matthew W. Rouse

Sergeants Major Academy

July 15, 2024, Fort Bliss, Texas. As I approached the building, my stomach churned. I wouldn't have admitted it then, but I *was* nervous. Walking up, I recognized familiar faces — some I hadn't seen in years. We greeted each other with high fives and hugs. We'd made it. Together, we stood in line, ready to begin day zero in-processing as U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) students.

Everyone here fought tooth and nail to be the best in their profession, and we succeeded. In just 12 short months, we would graduate and earn the rank of sergeant major.

Standing in line, I stared at the statues of the sergeant major and command sergeant major chevrons in the academy's courtyard. One thought dominated my mind: How did someone like me end up here? The answer: *leadership*.

Difficult Beginnings

I grew up in Southern California, a true Cali kid from a low-income area where food insecurity and violence were everyday realities. My mother was a prostitute, and my father was a man no one will ever know. My mother passed shortly after I was born, and I was adopted into a family that never truly accepted me. Abuse and neglect marked my childhood, compounded by years of sexual abuse I endured in silence. By my senior year, I decided to drop out of high school, leaving without a real explanation. On my departure, it seemed no one cared.

I spent years waiting tables and working odd jobs, drifting aimlessly. I was arrested four times before I turned 20. The death of a close friend prompted my departure from California, and I eventually landed in Denver.

The change of scenery didn't bring about the

improvement in my life I sought. At 22, I walked into a recruiting office — a high school dropout who needed waivers for everything. My recruiter worked hard to get me in, and I shipped off to basic training in Oklahoma.

The military was the perfect fit for a kid with no structure growing up. I thrived, making sergeant in just over two years. But my fast rise hit a wall.

At Fort Carson, Colorado, as a single dad reeling from a failed marriage, the anger and immaturity of my past resurfaced. I had a problem with authority. I wanted to be in charge, and I refused to admit when I was wrong.

My defiance reached a boiling point when I disobeyed a sergeant first class's direct order and was disrespectful. The result: an Article 15, a demotion to specialist, and a relief for cause NCO Evaluation Report (NCOER).

I spiraled into depression, convinced my career was over. One day, a comment about how I wanted to kill myself led to my NCO escorting me to the emergency room. I hit rock bottom in a hospital bed as my NCO-in-charge (NCOIC) and operations sergeant major stood by my side.

A Fresh Start

Shortly after, I was reassigned to a new brigade. My former operations officer-in-charge (OIC), who was familiar with my story, offered me an opportunity for a new beginning. When I reported to my new NCOIC, he said bluntly, "I know you've been through stuff, but I don't care. We're here to work. This is your fresh start."

His honesty was refreshing, although I doubted him at first. Over time, we worked — completing tasks, correcting mistakes, and moving forward. The other

NCOs on the team never held my past against me. Instead, they invested in me.

One day, my NCOIC asked, "How did you grow up?" It was the first time someone cared about the *how*, not just the *where*. Gradually, I shared my story, and that vulnerability solidified my commitment to him as a leader.

My OIC later told me why he brought me onto the team: "I saw potential in you and didn't want it wasted." His appraisal changed everything for me, someone who grew up feeling unseen.

With his mentorship and support, I successfully revitalized my career, earned back my sergeant stripes while serving in Afghanistan, and was promoted to staff sergeant shortly after. The care and leadership these men showed transformed my life. They could have written me off as just another troubled Soldier. Instead, they chose to lead.

The Takeaway

Leaders, this is our challenge: Understand the human behind the uniform. Every Soldier has a story, and those stories matter. It's our duty to look beyond struggles and see what our Soldiers could become. Do you have a Spc. Rouse in your formation? If you do, ask yourself: "What could they be?"

Eleven years after that turning point, I walked through the doors of the SGM-A. I stand here today — once a poor, broken kid filled with shame from sexual assault and a longing to feel accepted. A high school dropout. A Soldier who struggled with authority.

Now, I have the privilege to be called sergeant major. Why? Because leadership matters. ■



At his lowest point, a comment about how he wanted to end his life led to his NCO escorting him to the emergency room. In a hospital bed, his NCOIC and operations sergeant major stood by his side. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)



When reassigned to a new brigade, Master Sgt. Matthew W. Rouse was told, "We are here to work. This is your fresh start." That honest leadership, combined with trust and accountability, helped him rebuild his career. (AI image generated by *NCO Journal* staff)

Master Sgt. Matthew W. Rouse joined the Army in 2010 and is an SGM-A student. He is a Sergeant Audie Murphy Association member and a recipient of the Honorable Saint Barbara's Award. He has served in several distinguished positions throughout his career, and upon graduation, he will serve as an action officer for the 17th Sergeant Major of the Army.



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