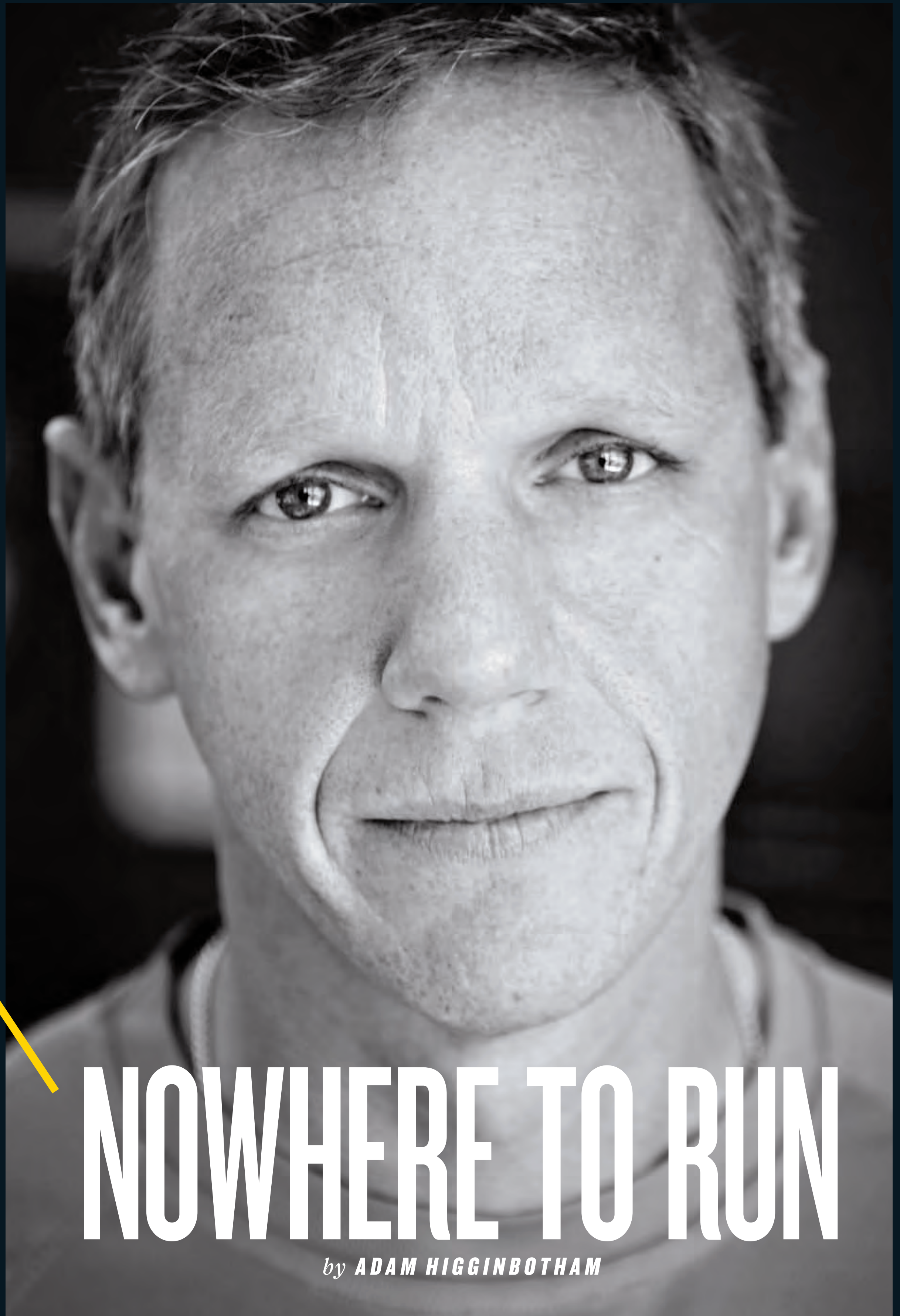
CHARLIE ENGLE HAS BEEN A RECORD-SETTING ULTRAMARATHONER,

A REALITY TV PRODUCER, A MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER, A CRACKHEAD, AND AN OVERLEVERAGED REAL ESTATE GAMBLER.

NOW HE'S SITTING IN A FEDERAL PRISON ON CHARGES OF MORTGAGE FRAUD,

AND HE'S NOT SITTING STILL FOR A MOMENT.

JULIUS METOYER III



NOWHERE TO RUN

by **ADAM HIGGINBOTHAM**

TAMARA LACKEY

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MIMI'S CAFE ON WEST FRIENDLY AVENUE in Greensboro, North Carolina, is not an obvious place to pick for a first date. Gloomy and dank, marooned on a concrete island in the middle of a mall parking lot, it's nobody's idea of a romantic spot. Nonetheless, when an attractive brunette he had only just met suggested to Charlie Engle that they meet there for lunch one Wednesday afternoon in March 2009, he agreed immediately. Engle was 46 and, once again, single. A divorced father of two, he was living alone in a rented apartment in a complex that was otherwise almost deserted — one of many new developments built in Greensboro during the real estate boom and made unsalable when the bubble burst. So when Ellen Bradshaw knocked on his door, explained that she was looking to rent downstairs, and wanted to ask him about what it was like living in the building, he couldn't have been happier. Bradshaw was petite, flirtatious, recently separated — and, better still, a runner. Running was Engle's long-standing obsession and, more recently, his career. In 2007 he and two others became the first men ever known to run across the Sahara Desert, and the journey became the subject of a documentary co-produced by Matt Damon. Engle had turned his subsequent celebrity to his advantage, with sponsorships, endorsements, and engagements as a motivational speaker. Bradshaw was keen to hear him describe his exploits, and they agreed to have lunch together the following day.

TAMARA LACKEY

They met at Mimi's shortly after one o'clock. According to the transcript of the conversation that would later be produced as evidence in federal court, they stayed until 2:48 PM. Engle, characteristically, talked a good deal: about basketball, the state of the economy, his children's education, and a lot about his own life. "I thought she seemed overly interested in me," he wrote to me in a recent letter, "but what man doesn't like that?" Toward the end of the meal, Bradshaw, who'd said she worked as a financial consultant, asked Engle if he'd ever done any investing. He had: Five years previously, he had supported himself for a while by flipping houses. "I had a couple of good liar loans out there, you know," he explained. "With my...my mortgage broker who didn't mind writing down, you know, that I was making 400 grand a year when he knew I wasn't."

Uttering this single sentence would eventually cost Charlie Engle his livelihood, his reputation, his freedom, and — if the government has its way — somewhere in excess of a quarter of a million dollars. Because his date that afternoon had not been strictly honest about her intentions or, indeed, much else. Ellen's real name was not Bradshaw, but Burrows. And she was not a financial consultant, but an undercover agent for the IRS. She was wearing a wire, and every word she and Charlie spoke was being monitored and recorded by a team of federal agents sitting in the parking lot outside.

Two months later, a group of six IRS special agents in flak jackets handcuffed Engle outside his apartment building and charged him with a total of 15 counts of five separate felonies. In the subsequent trial, the conversation in Mimi's Cafe would prove to be crucial to the government's case, and Engle was found guilty of the same crime that was also apparently committed by hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens during the go-go years of the real estate bonanza. "To the best of my knowledge," he tells me when I meet him at Beckley Federal Correctional Institution in West Virginia, "I am still the only person in the United States in prison for allegedly misstating income on a home-loan application."

It seems somehow wrong that the toughest of Iron Men — who has spent more than 20 years seeking out the most demanding physical and psychological tests he could find, in some of the most treacherous locations on Earth — should wind up convicted of minor white-collar fraud, serving time in a prison of such low security that it lacks even a fence. "I wouldn't even get into the criminal club," he says. "We're in a camp. If there's gangs here, it's like gangs of accountants."

Yet Charlie Engle also spent his life on a collision course with authority, and the path that finally led to a tangle with a CPA ridiculously wearing a bulletproof vest had already been marked by many improbable turns.

Before he decided to run across Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, he had already been a car salesman, a TV producer, and a crack addict; and along with Matt Damon and others he co-founded the clean-water charity H2O Africa. Now his criminal conviction has made him the subject of an outraged editorial in the *New York Times* and a segment on PBS, and a cause célèbre for anyone who feels that the real culprits behind the real estate meltdown — men like Angelo Mozilo of Countrywide Financial and the bankers at Goldman Sachs — are the ones who belong behind bars. "I am an extremist," Engle says. "My personality, when you take it as a whole…there really is no in-between. My quest has been for balance — but that's a lifelong effort."

As a motivational speaker, Engle was always telling people that life is about adapting to changing circumstances, and in the conversations I have with him from Beckley, he is always painstakingly cheerful, funny, and self-deprecating. He says he's embracing the newness of the experience. "It's fascinating," he says one day, a few weeks into his sentence. "If it wasn't happening to me, I'd be more fascinated."

But it's the self-imposed torture that he so frequently experienced as one of the world's leading endurance runners that has made him determined to gain something from his incarceration. "It is my belief," he says, "that all useful things I learn have come through suffering."

CHARLIE ENGLE RAN HIS FIRST MILE in less than five minutes before he reached ninth grade, and in his junior year, he hit 4:40. Although he got more attention as the quarterback of the Pinecrest High football team, in Southern Pines, North Carolina, he never learned to cope with the pain of being hit. "The punishment that appealed to me was from running," he told *Runners World* magazine in 2008. "Even as a teenager, I was getting up at 5:30 AM and running. I had that urge."

Engle was a perfect offspring of the counterculture. His parents met at college; his mother was just 18 when he was born. She divorced his father three years later. At 10, Engle was already different from the other kids. "It was a very bohemian upbringing," he writes. "Everyone in my world was an adult, protested the Vietnam War, and smoked pot. I only wore bell-bottoms, had long hair, and already couldn't understand why people refused to see things my way."

"IT IS MY BELIEF THAT ALL USEFUL THINGS THAT I LEARN HAVE COME THROUGH SUFFERING."

Nevertheless, he excelled at high school: lettering in five sports, finishing near the top of his class, and making student body president. "I was motivated by the recognition, not by the subject or the sport, with the exception of cross-country. I liked the attention." In 1980 he followed his father to the University of North Carolina, where he planned to major in communications. But as soon as he arrived, he discovered that the abilities that had made him exceptional back in Southern Pines were, at college, simply average. But he found a new way to stand out. "I figured out pretty quickly there was one thing I wasn't average at, and that was drinking," he tells me. "I distinguished myself in that very early on." His fraternity brother Lester Pace remembers Engle as the center of attention: "He just naturally drew people to him. He was like a magnet." One night in his sophomore year, a friend offered Engle a bullet filled with cocaine. "A couple of hits on that changed everything. Within a year, I was pretty much engulfed in it." Eventually, he stopped attending classes, and in 1983, two of Charlie's fraternity brothers called Richard Engle in Seattle and told him to come rescue his son. Charlie was 20 when he moved with his father and stepmother to California, where Richard gave him a job, running one of two Baskin-Robbins franchises he owned. Charlie rewarded him by taking money from the register to buy cocaine — he would sell enough to recoup the cash, snort the rest, and get back in time to open the parlor the next morning.

Amazingly, between binges Engle continued to exercise harder than ever. "Even when I was in horrible shape, I always knew that running was there for me, my secret weapon, and could bring me back from the brink." In his mid-20s, he began entering triathlons and did well enough to qualify for the national championships. And gradually he built the facade of a successful middle-class life. In 1987 he married his girlfriend, Pam, and bought a house in Monterey, California, with a hot tub overlooking the ocean. He got a job as a salesman at Victory Toyota in Seaside — and proved very good at it, winning a national competition. Yet the drinking and drug use continued. "Most binges would last for a few days, and then I would clean up for a while, angry at myself for wasting money and destroying my body," he writes in a letter from prison. "So, in between binges, I would train harder and harder." In 1989 he ran his first marathon, in Big Sur, "to convince myself and everyone else there wasn't anything wrong with me: 'Look what I can do!'" The following year, he ran three marathons in less than three months: Napa Valley, Boston, and Big Sur again. Yet when he completed the third race, he looked around him at the euphoric faces of the other runners and realized that he felt nothing. "Empty," he says. "Completely devoid of emotion." Three days later, he took off on another bender.

In the meantime, Engle's success on the showroom floor had led to his getting a job as a sales manager with Ford. But he hated sitting behind a desk. "Charlie's never been a conventional-type guy," says Lester Pace. "He wouldn't survive a regular job, trudging along that path gradually. He's a risk taker. Charlie has always dreamed big — feast and famine, his entire life."

In 1989, Engle found a way out of the nine-to-five, in the emerging business of "paintless dent repair." At the time, the now commonplace technique of using hand tools to remove dings in cars without the expense of respraying wasn't widely understood by insurance companies. So when a car dealership's inventory was damaged by extreme weather — hail, for example — the dealer could call in a paintless expert to fix the damage. But the insurers would compensate for the far more expensive replacement and repainting — a windfall for the dealer and the dent specialist alike. The business was a minor sensation, and before long Charlie was traveling from city to city, and country to country, with a team of up to 50, and making as much as $300,000 a year — for only six months' work. "Hail season," he explains. He made so much money that, in 1995, he began investing in real estate, and over the next 10 years, he bought and sold as many as 15 different properties. It seemed like a safe bet.

But wherever he went, Charlie took his problems with him. "I was an active addict on the road, with money in my pocket — a dangerous combination," he writes. When traveling, Engle often found himself with $2,000 or $3,000 in cash, which he often spent on crack. The drug became the engine of binges of superhuman length and degradation. Instead of days, they stretched for weeks; instead of beer and tequila, he drank Mad Dog 20/20 or Thunderbird, took crystal meth, and snorted heroin. Rather than partying with friends or colleagues, he disappeared into motel rooms with prostitutes, who hung on until the last of his rocks was smoked and his money spent.

At one point, he says he lived on the street for weeks. "Nobody knew where I was," he says, "but everyone, including my wife, assumed I was on to the next job."

The end finally came two months after the birth of his first son, when a six-day crack binge in Wichita, Kansas, concluded with a robbery attempt, with dealers firing a dozen shots at his car while he tried to escape. Engle eventually staggered from his car and, for the first time in his life, said a prayer. By the end of that day, he had been to three Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. The following morning, he went for his first sober run in 11 years.

Engle's decade-long odyssey of drink and drugs has apparently had little long-term effect on his health. "The body is amazing, and it will forgive me," he writes from prison. He has a perpetually runny nose and problems he attributes to running into street signs and car doors. But he admits there is some damage he'll never be able to account for: "I have a few scars that have no known explanation."

I FIRST MEET CHARLIE ENGLE one bright April morning, in the hall outside the visitors' room of the minimum-security prison camp, a collection of low brick buildings in a hollow of the mountainous wilds of West Virginia. "Next year," he quips, "I'm booking my vacation somewhere warmer." He is dressed in a regulation dark green uniform and heavy leather boots with steel toes. Clipped to his breast pocket is a plastic badge printed with the name of his dormitory block and a photograph taken of him on the day he began his sentence. In it he is grinning like a man who has just won the lottery. "My nonconformist nature," he explains.

Despite his imprisonment, Engle looks fit and healthy: His face is tanned, his graying hair cropped short. He smiles almost constantly and laughs frequently; it's sometimes easy to forget that when the conversation ends, only one of us will be permitted to leave here. Engle has done his best to maintain a program of exercise since he arrived. "I've gotten back to the basics of push-ups, pull-ups, and sit-ups. And running. And I've found that I don't really miss my fancy gym." The prison recreation area has roughly a quarter-mile dirt-and-gravel running track surrounding a softball field and basketball courts, and he's been able to spend a good amount of time on it. When we meet, the longest distance he's managed is 21 miles: "I ran pretty well that day — about three hours." When he can't get out to the track — if, for example, the entire prison is on lockdown — he'll run in place. Sometimes he'll jog in his cubicle for two hours at a time.

But the gravel loop exerts an inexorable pull. He especially likes it when the weather is bad. In rain and snow, the other inmates stay indoors and Engle has the opportunity to escape the otherwise constant background hum that accompanies prison life — a needling, sometimes agonizing sound of slamming doors, coughing, farting, muttered conversation — and experience the rare pleasure of running alone. "I can get out there," he says, "and do the thing that keeps me sane."

In the three years after becoming sober, he ran 30 marathons. "Because that's not addictive behavior at all," he says sardonically. "What I liked was suffering. And, to a certain extent, running was punishment." Initially, the way he structured his training for each marathon reflected his need for self-flagellation. "You know what my program was?" he asks. "Run as fucking hard as I could every time I went out the door."

Engle discovered ultra-running in 1996, in what he's since described as a farcical accident. In Brisbane, Australia, on another hail-damage-repair trip, he signed up for what he thought was a 10-K race; but at the starting line, two other competitors asked him if he'd ever done 100 kilometers before. He decided to do one loop of the race as a training run, then stop. Many hours later, after slogging around 62 miles of undulating track, Engle discovered he'd won — and he'd found his brand.

After Brisbane he began traveling the globe in pursuit of more endurance events. In 2000 he joined a team in his first Eco-Challenge — a 320-mile run in Borneo organized by *Survivor* impresario Mark Burnett. In 2003 he won a six-day footrace across the Gobi Desert, in China. In 2004 he won the Jungle Marathon in Brazil, a seven-day, 220-kilometer race through the Amazon. There, he befriended two other competitors, the Taiwanese runner Kevin Lin and Canadian Ray Zahab. A month later, Zahab asked Engle, and later they both asked Lin, to attempt a run across the Sahara Desert. From the coast of Senegal to Egypt on the Red Sea, it stretches for more than 4,000 miles of the most uniquely inhospitable environment on Earth. Yet Engle soon decided that not only would the three of them mount an expedition to run the Sahara, but that if they succeeded, he could somehow turn running into his livelihood. He knew the idea was selfish, idiotic even. "Nobody gets into ultra-running to make money," he says. "But once it entered my head, it wasn't going to leave until I took a shot."

IF THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES when Charlie Engle's belief in the power of his own will has bordered on the irrational, there have been others when it's worked for him with almost supernatural force. That's how it was when he filled out the application form for his first Eco-Challenge race, describing his occupation as "documentary cameraman."

At the time, his experience with a camera barely went beyond videotaping his kids, but he thought that if he put the idea out there, he might somehow just become a filmmaker. "Without wanting to sound too New Age about it," he explains, "I genuinely felt that if I said it enough, it would happen. That was how I looked at things — and still do." And when the producers of CBS's *48 Hours* came looking for a competitor to carry a camera through the Borneo Eco-Challenge, they asked Charlie. The 11 minutes of his footage used in the completed show gave Engle a tantalizing taste of what it might be like to combine the thing he most enjoyed — running — with a way of making a living. "I was on my way to being divorced," he says now, "and I wanted to find a new path. I wanted to do something I loved."

Though he was completely unqualified, he landed a job as a cameraman on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. Engle now attributes the job offer partly to his proven ability to stay awake for long periods of time, and partly to the power of his personality. "If I have a gift at all, it's my ability to connect with people," he says. His new life was complicated: He worked on the show in L.A. and on the road, but still took paintless-dent-repair jobs and occasionally drew on equity from his investment properties to support himself, his two sons, and his now ex-wife. But the reality show was a hit, and by 2004 Engle had graduated from cameraman to producer on one of the most successful programs on network television. Then, through connections in the industry, he persuaded Oscar-winning documentary director James Moll to film his Sahara expedition. Engle quit *Extreme*

THE PEAKS AND VALLEYS OF CHARLIE ENGLE

From left: Engle, third from left, on the summit of Denali, in 2002; with Zahab and Lin during their 4,300-mile run across the Sahara Desert; talking about the run with Jay Leno, in 2007; incongruously upbeat in his mug shots, taken last year.

FROM LEFT: TONY DI ZINNO; DON HOLTZ PHOTOGRAPHY; PAUL DRINKWATER/NBCU PHOTO BANK/AP PHOTO

Makeover in early 2006, intending to begin the run that March. But there were months of delays. With dwindling income, Engle was forced to draw further on the equity of his real estate holdings.

The three men finally started running on November 2, 2006. It was predictably impossible: When sandstorms, scorpions, or land mines were not a problem, the searing heat and injuries were. In the end, it took almost four months — and a final 48 hours of running without any sleep at all — for all three to reach the Red Sea. In Moll's finished film, Engle is far from a sympathetic character: driven to the point of monomania and apparently prepared to leave his teammates behind in a last burst of speed at the end. Today, Engle says that although the events in the film certainly happened, some were stripped of their context for dramatic effect. "In real life, I'm a 90 percent decent guy and 10 percent asshole. While what's depicted in the film might not be completely accurate, it depicts me pretty much as I've just described." He pauses. "Maybe I'm being generous at 90 percent."

Running the Sahara was eventually released in 2008, and Engle undertook a national tour to promote it and H2O Africa. He had begun making money from a handful of endorsements, was involved in launching a line of skin-care products designed for athletes, and occasionally earned a $15,000 fee for speaking engagements. At the same time, he was preparing for his next expedition — an attempt to break the 28-year-old record for running across America coast to coast, which would also be the subject of a documentary.

But back in North Carolina, *Running the Sahara* had attracted the attention of Robert W. Nordlander, of the Criminal Investigations Division of the IRS in Greensboro. Nordlander was an agent of idiosyncratic methods. He would later tell a grand jury that if he saw someone driving a Ferrari, he might run his plates and examine his tax return to check if he could afford such an expensive car. *Running the Sahara* was apparently Engle's Ferrari. "Being the special agent that I am," Nordlander testified, "I was wondering, 'How does a guy train for this?' Because most people work nine to five, and it's very difficult to train for this part-time." Nordlander decided to open a tax investigation on Engle, which would eventually involve going through his trash, impounding his mail, and finally sending an undercover agent to meet him, wearing a wire. On May 19, 2010, two months after his lunch with Ellen Bradshaw, Engle attended the premiere of the documentary made about his coast-to-coast run, *Running America*, at the Carolina Theatre in Greensboro. The following day, he was still riding high from the premiere when he saw Robert Nordlander emerge from the coffee shop in his apartment building, followed by five armed IRS agents. They told Charlie he was under arrest and confiscated his passport. He spent that night in jail. "If that's not a change of course," Engle tells me, in the prisoners' visiting room at Beckley, "I hope I don't ever experience one."

"THIS IS A MAN," ENGLE SAYS OF THE IRS AGENT WHO ARRESTED HIM, "WHO THINKS THAT THE ONLY WAY TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN AMERICA IS TO WORK NINE TO FIVE. AND IF YOU DON'T, YOU'RE SUBJECT TO SUSPICION."

Facing federal charges, Charlie Engle's irrepressible optimism didn't serve him well. "He really relied on the presumption that people were just going to see it his way," Engle's friend, former criminal attorney Chris Justice, says. "I don't think Charlie was concerned it would end badly until the jury said, 'Guilty.' "

In October 2010, Engle stood trial in Norfolk, Virginia, on charges of bank fraud, wire fraud, mail fraud, money laundering, and lying under oath — accused of devising a scheme to swindle mortgage lenders out of hundreds of thousands of dollars. This scheme apparently rested on four loans taken out by Engle on two properties in 2005 and 2006. He'd defaulted on the loans in late 2006, as the real estate market began to go under and, like millions of other homeowners across the U.S., he found rising interest rates made it impossible for him to keep up payments.

The prosecution relied heavily on the supposed confession Engle gave Ellen Burrows in Mimi's Cafe, although what he said might more accurately be viewed as an accusation against an unscrupulous broker. There were other questionable aspects of the case: A government-appointed handwriting expert determined that some of the initials on the loan applications were probably forged; the broker Engle used subsequently pleaded guilty to a series of felonies connected to his handling of other loans but received a reduced sentence for testifying against Engle. Charlie was convicted anyway. The judge took into account Engle's charity work and the example he's set to recovering addicts, departing from federal guidelines to give a sentence of less than two years — but also instructing him to pay restitution of $262,500 on the loans. "The prosecution convinced the jury I was guilty of something," Engle said afterward. "But they weren't sure what."

From prison, Engle continues to insist on his innocence. He's stung when people reassure him that everybody makes mistakes. He says he knows what they mean and appreciates their support. But part of him wants to reply, "Yeah, and when I make one, I'll let you know."

Today, Engle says the same hollowness he felt at the end of the Big Sur marathon more than 20 years ago continues to bloom inside him: "Not being satisfied with what I accomplished is still a problem. That problem, which I think is related to my *(continued on page 132)*

ENGLE *continued from page 131*

addictive nature, is still alive. And I have to be careful not to feed it."

The need to fill this void — part of what drove him to ever more extreme feats — also helped land him in prison. He knows that if he had never decided to run across the Sahara — if there had been no documentary and no celebrity — he would not be in Beckley now. "I asked Nordlander why he was targeting me. He said my 'local notoriety was a factor,'" Engle writes in a letter. "This is a man," he tells me, "who thinks the only way to be successful in America is to work nine to five. And if you don't, you're subject to suspicion."

And yet the capacity for endurance Engle has built over his years of punishing races is helping him cope with imprisonment. "My self-imposed suffering through the years absolutely prepared me for this. Just like running 100 miles, there are times when it's terrible and painful. But experience has taught me if I just keep moving, things get better."

Since he arrived at prison in February, he's been helping other inmates devise fitness programs, and he teaches a few yoga classes each week. He always liked to joke that he'd become a full-time Buddhist but he wasn't ready to give up all his stuff. "Now," he writes, "I have no stuff. So maybe this is my chance for transformation." He says that one of the things he misses most is physical contact. "I am a hugger, as anyone who has spent time around me knows. There is no hugging in prison. Not to mention no crying, no whining, no pining, no longing, no sex, no vegetables, and no flaxseed powder. That's the other thing I miss terribly: vegetables." For the first time in his life, he's had to get used to being told what to do. "This is one place," he says, "you don't want to stand out."

In early July, Charlie Engle writes me one last letter, answering some questions I've sent him, and many I have not. It's a long message, 13 pages of typescript, and toward the end he turns to considering the injustices of his case. "I have no real idea why this happened to me," he writes. "Maybe it is some sort of karmic revenge for my past deeds, or maybe I am here to learn more and tell the real story of what is happening in our prisons."

When he's finally released, he plans to use his following on Facebook and Twitter to let people know the truth about prison conditions. He wants to make more documentaries. If it comes to it, he says he can always fall back on his paintless-repair skills. He insists that incarceration has not blunted his optimism. "My government has destroyed the life that I had," he writes, "but they have given me a new one, and I will make it even better."

Back in the visitors' room, the warden's assistant shuffles her papers, as our allotted time comes to an end. I ask Engle what he plans to do first when he gets out. He pauses and then smiles, as if he's been waiting all morning for me to ask him this question.

"Run," he says. "If I could do anything, I would literally run out of here. And then run the 200 miles home."

SMUGGLERS *continued from page 125*

and up clatters this old minibus driven by some Afghan bloke — and these airmen just get in and drive off.

"The Yanks were all going, 'Hey, how will you get the plane back?' And the crew just said, 'We won't. It's an old one — we only bought it for this job, and we're ditching it here.' Half a million dollars it cost them. They held it together with string, just long enough to land, cleared $1.5 million in profit, and left it to rust. It's still there."

Whatever the cost, the occupying forces were intent on being seen to improve things, and quickly. In a bid to be seen as saving valuable tax dollars, they welcomed NGOs from around the world as partners in the post-invasion relief and reconstruction. They wanted, said Donald Rumsfeld, to invite "nonstate actors" to play a valuable role. Even before he'd finished that sentence, phones began to ring in Belarus, Benin.

Mickey's team found themselves at the front of the queue for aid and reconstruction work. They knew Afghanistan well — the conditions, the runways, the places that could, at a stretch, be made to serve as runways. They knew the trade hubs and the missile alleys. And unlike a lot of crews, they were up for it. It was, shrugs Mickey, "*nichevo*" — nothing at all. He jokes that he's flown more over Afghanistan and Central Asia since 2001 than he did in the years he was actually stationed there. It was great — flying straight jobs on reputable charters — and the money was good, both with the standard payments and the money they made for themselves on the side, filling the extra spaces in their plane with smokes, booze, unlisted weaponry, luxury goods, and all the other stuff you'd sell your soul for in Afghanistan.

"DON'T STOP. JUST DROP THE MONEY!" THE STRONGBOX AND ITS PARACHUTE WERE ALREADY POSITIONED. HE CUT THE LINE AND $20 MILLION WAS RELEASED INTO THE SKY.

For coalition governments, the possibility that these cargo planes bound for Afghanistan and, just a few months later, Iraq, might hold unwelcome bounty — in the form of unregistered, warlord-bound guns and ammo going in, and opium coming out — was conveniently ignored. Perhaps it was far down the list of priorities for a coalition fighting an insurgency. If so, they probably should have checked where the insurgents were getting their arms. Perhaps they genuinely never realized. Perhaps, amid an occupation that was already fending off accusations of a lack of foresight, it was an embarrassing secret best not talked about. Whatever the case, by the time Baghdad had fallen and the second wave of the coalition-sponsored cargo gold rush had begun, nobody thought to ask whose Il-76s and Antonovs were collecting "preferred supplier" fuel vouchers out there on the runways of Bagram and Baghdad. Or just where else, and with whom, they'd been doing business.

THE FOUR TURKEYS BAR may be the sleaziest pilot pit in the whole of Entebbe, Uganda. The 24-hour bar-cum-pickup joint is legendary among ex-Soviet airmen, dealers, and hookers, and it's conveniently placed for East Africa's biggest and least regulated strategic air base.

It's a hot, wet night at the end of another rainy season. Mickey, who arrived here in Uganda en route from the Congo to the UAE, is so face-meltingly stoned on a bag of Entebbe's finest weed that he can barely stand. I am here with five very loaded "mercs," as the local media has dubbed these mercenary airmen, and all their languages have mystically melded with mine into a series of half-finished gibberish, canny smiles of recognition, and shouted exhortations to drink. Scanning the dark, narrow room, I spot Ugandan hookers and a handful of tattooed South African military contractors. One character at the door offers to sell us loose Viagra. There's enough pungent, skunk-weed aroma sweating through enough pockets that my eyes sting, and enough Russian airmen to form a squadron. Many of these privatized Soviet crews have made their homes across the globe, registering their planes in countries with notoriously lax, obscure, and corrupt record-keeping (like Georgia and Kazakhstan), and setting up their businesses in the Arabian Gulf and across sub-Saharan Africa, where they have formed a whole new class of freewheeling business owners.

Mickey will cite the allure of a distinctly un-Russian sun and a change of scene as reasons for relocating to the Arabian peninsula, but it's worth noting that the Sharjah airport he treats as home is a short flight from stealth cargo hot spots like Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iran.

In strategic hot spots around Africa — anywhere there's trouble and a decent landing strip by which to profit from it — a lively circuit of Russian-run cafes, offices, and garages has sprung up to cater to these bizarre clusters of expat aviators. Complemented by local prostitutes, shops, and bars, these unofficial Soviet outposts, referred to by names like Little Minsk and Russiaville, provide homes away from home. Bars like the Four Turkeys stud the plains and coastlines and show Russian sports.

Tonight, Mickey and the boys are letting off some steam, shouting over the televised football match and downing Club beers with vodka chasers. Mickey's not flying tonight, but says he could — it's common practice for aircrews to unwind at the Four Turkeys before staggering the few yards to the combined civilian and military airbase and shooting the breeze with the guards before climbing into their planes and starting the engines for takeoff.

The terminal, haunted by the same pack of stray dogs that's whining for scraps outside the Four Turkeys, overlooks row upon row of UN huts. Nearby, in a leaky dilapidated cor-