The Marine Corps' new on-duty standard for drinking alcohol is so strict that less than one drink at lunch would trigger a "positive" and get a warrior in hot water.

The Washington Times reported earlier this week that the Corps sent a Dec. 12 message to commanders officially beginning mandatory breath tests for all 197,000 Marines twice each year.

A reading of just .01 percent subjects a Marine to counseling. A Marine who registers a .04 must be examined by medical staff for fitness for duty.

The Corps is the first among the Army, Air Force and Navy to begin random mandatory testing of all personnel. The Army leaves test decisions up to a commander and prohibits a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .05 percent or higher. The Air Force also instructs commanders to order alcohol tests when appropriate but has no compulsory program.

The Navy said in March it plans to conduct mandatory breath tests. A spokeswoman says the program will not start until next year. Overall, this makes the new Corps' anti-alcohol testing the military's strictest.

The Marine memo calls a "positive test result" a reading of .01 or greater, which results in automatic "screening and treatment as appropriate."

"I think it's outrageously low," said Neal Puckett, a defense attorney and retired Marine Corps judge advocate. "Guess it's zero tolerance for alcohol, just like the zero tolerance for drugs."

"No one would be impaired at a 0.01 alcohol concentration," Bruce Goldberger, a University of Florida professor and a renowned forensic toxicologist, told The Times.

For an average-size man of 150 pounds, one drink would register a .02 reading, Mr. Goldberger said. For an average woman, he said, a single drink would result in a .03.

"So if you look at a scenario where someone in the Marine Corps goes to a bar and drinks two drinks, that would give him a BAC of a .04," he said. "It would take him about two to three hours to clear the alcohol in the bloodstream."

"It's possible if a Marine goes to a bar and is drinking a substantial amount of alcohol over the course of an evening, and he gets himself to a BAC of 1.5 or 2.0, if they are tested first thing in the morning when they report to duty, they may still have some alcohol in their blood and test positive," he added.

Mr. Goldberger, who is director of toxicology at the university's Department of Pathology, said various breath testers, often referred to as "Breathalyzers," are reliable and accurate.

He said any Marine picked for a random test who has recently gargled with mouthwash should

be given 20 minutes or so to let the alcohol disappear before blowing into the machine. A reading of .01 "is very low," he said, meaning the Marine Corps must ensure that the breath testers it uses can discern a "negative" score from a minimal reading.

Mr. Goldberger said the "industry standard" is generally .02 for employees, a less strict measurement than the Corps'.

Maj. Shawn Haney, a Marine spokeswoman, told The Times that the Corps conducted pilot random testing from May to October at three locations, including the Marine Barracks in Washington. Of 797 Marines tested, 99.99 passed, she said.

A Corps statement said, "Breathalyzer testing will enable commanders to test 100 percent of the Marines in their unit in order to take appropriate actions related to the health and safety of Marines such as training, education and referral to substance abuse counseling."

The Marine Corps did not respond to a question from The Times on why it choose .01 as a "positive" reading requiring corrective action.

Army regulations say an on-duty soldier with .05 BAC or more is subject to discipline under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and can receive a less-than-honorable discharge. Commanders may set limits below .05 and bar alcohol consumption altogether on deployment.

"Someone who blows a .05 while on duty could potentially be not fit for duty since there are effects of alcohol even at low levels," said Mr. Goldberger, who was a key defense witness in the acquittal of former Major League Baseball pitcher Roger Clemens on charges he lied about taking performance-enhancing drugs.

A blood-alcohol content of .08 — which means eight one-hundredths of 1 percent of the blood by volume is alcohol — is the U.S. standard for drunkenness while driving. Concentration, reasoning, depth perception and other skills can be impaired by a blood-alcohol content lower than .08.

The armed forces for years have required mandatory drug testing. The services have wrestled with the idea of doing the same for alcohol, given the belief that domestic violence and sexual assaults often are rooted in excessive drinking.

In September, in a study requested by the Pentagon, the Institute of Medicine, part of the National Academy of Sciences, concluded that drug and alcohol abuse by military personnel constitutes a "public health crisis" and "both are detrimental to force readiness and psychological fitness."

Source: Washington Times; Rowan Scarborough