



**ABLE BODIED:** Precious Dube, left, Pinky Zungu and Bongiwe Mbambo recently earned marine pilot open licences, qualifying them to guide vessels in and out of the harbour.

PICTURE: S'BONELO NGCOBO

## Trio chart new waters for women

### NOSIPHO LUTHULI

THREE Durban women have joined an elite group – holders of marine pilot open licences, which allow them to guide vessels, including supertankers, into port.

Precious Dube, Bongiwe Mbambo and Pinky Zungu are three of only five female marine pilots in the country. The three qualified in June after a long apprenticeship, starting as cadets with shipping lines before progressing to commanding tugs, earning a wealth of experience along the way.

Their work as marine pilots involves guiding ships past navigational hazards, into and out of port. Helicopters take them out to ships and fetch them after a ship has successfully left port. It's potentially dangerous work, which involves being winched onto and

off ships with a harness and thin cable.

The pilots work closely with the ship's master, giving instructions to the tugs and sometimes controlling the ship themselves. It's a tough, male-dominated world, with no room for mistakes.

Mbambo, 29, said, "It's scary, I won't lie. It's even scarier when it's windy because the ship is not stable. But I got used to it and I enjoy it a lot."

Dube, 35, agrees that it's not plain sailing. "I'm very happy; no words can describe my happiness right now," she said.

Zungu, 28, said she loved her job and could see herself doing it for the rest of her working life.

All three completed diplomas in Maritime Studies at the then Natal Technikon.

Dube was born in Kwa-Mashu and grew up in Inanda.

After high school she trained as a teacher, but couldn't find work for two years. Then a friend told her about Maritime Studies, offered at Natal Technikon, and she thought, 'It's better than doing nothing.' So in 2002 she enrolled, and has not looked back since.

She wants to be a harbour master one day.

Mbambo, who is originally from Mpembeni at Richards Bay, but now lives in Glenwood, has had a keen interest in maritime studies from an early age. She studied it at high school and was one of three students from her school to get a Transnet bursary.

Zungu was raised in Umlazi, and attended Westcliff Secondary. She chose the Maritime Studies course not knowing what it involved.

"I just wanted to go away somewhere for free, but I

started to enjoy it."

Transnet National Ports Authority's Tau Morwe said by earning their licences the three had showed that women, particularly black women, were capable of success in male-dominated fields.

"The maritime sector used to be one that was closed off to the historically disadvantaged, including women, but this is changing and we are geared for even greater success stories like this."

August is Women's month, and with this in mind the three said they were still breaking stereotypes.

The other two women pilots in the country are Theresa Williams, who in 1999 was the first female marine pilot in South Africa, and Nontsindiso Kunene, who in 2002 became the first female harbour master in Africa.