

In South Africa at the turn of the last century relations between the Dutch in the Transvaal and Orange Free State and the British in the Cape and Natal deteriorated rapidly after a conference held in Bloemfontein, capital of the Orange Free State to resolve the problems arising from the massive influx of immigrants as a result of the discovery of gold in the Transvaal and their claims for citizenship rights ended in stalemate. Both sides moved forces to their mutual borders, the British forces in Natal numbered less than 16,000 whilst the Transvaal Lurgher Army alone totalled nearly 27,000. In September the decision to despatch more than 10,000 troops to South Africa from home and abroad was made in London. The Transvaal Government responded to this major troop movement with an ultimatum issued on the 9th October, with a time limit of two days, that all British forces were to withdraw from the borders of the Transvaal and all troops landed since the previous June be removed from South Africa and those on their way from overseas were not to be landed. Two days later on the 11th October 1889 war was declared and the Boers invaded.

The British forces were quickly overwhelmed and forced back to the towns of Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith which were then besieged. Ladysmith was the most vulnerable of the three towns and should it fall a great moral victory could be claimed by the marauding Boer forces. It was at this point that the Royal Navy was called into the action.